

From Monaco to Mycenae: Europe in the English Golden Age of Detective Fiction

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Abstract

Since Alison Light's chapter on Agatha Christie in *Forever England* (1991), scholars have used detective fiction as a lens to examine English place, identity, and society. I present an alternative vantage point on the geography of English Golden Age detective fiction by considering England in terms of its relationship to Europe. Drawing on human geographer Yi-Fu Tuan's notion of "mythical space," I examine tourism and leisure travel on the French Riviera in Christie's *The Mystery of the Blue Train* (1928) and Elizabeth Gill's *The Crime Coast* (1931), and ritual journeys informed by Greek myth in Gladys Mitchell's *Come Away, Death* (1937) and Christie's short story collection *The Labours of Hercules* (1947), with reference to other detective fiction authors of the interwar period such as Dorothy L. Sayers and Margery Allingham. Noting the persistent presence and proximity of Continental Europe in the imaginary of the English Golden Age, I argue that detectives Hercule Poirot and Mrs. Bradley employ their understanding of the specific cultural, psychological, and imaginative narratives of ancient and modern Europe to make not only crime but European myths and mythical space visible and intelligible, and emphasize their relevance to English world views and creativity.

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In Dorothy L. Sayers' *Busman's Honeymoon* (1938), Harriet Vane observes how perfectly her husband, aristocratic detective Lord Peter Wimsey, fits into the archetypes of country life: "she thought, 'I have married England'" (83). The Golden Age of English detective fiction is here taken to overlap with the interwar period and edge into the Second World War;¹ its authors whose work has consistently remained in print are, in fact, often considered to have *written* England—a pastoral, nostalgic, and insular England of rigid class hierarchy, village greens and vicarages, and xenophobia.

As Alison Light has argued, "[Agatha] Christie has been elevated to something like a national institution, seen as a particularly home-grown variety of writer, 'as English as Buckingham Palace, the House of Commons and the Tower of London'" (62). And yet, the cultural imaginary of Sayers' and Christie's novels is inflected with the geographical proximity of Continental Europe. Harriet's synecdochic English husband is half-French, and "The map of Europe was familiar ground to him" (*Gaudy Night* 56). Christie's detective Hercule Poirot is a Belgian, and several of her Golden Age texts cross the English Channel. Recently recovered works from the period, such as Elizabeth Gill's *The Crime Coast* (1931, reissued in 2017) and short stories by J. Jefferson Farjeon, H. C. Bailey, and H. de Vere Stacpoole, anthologized in *Continental Crimes* (2017), establish the regular presence of English holiday-makers, expatriates, travelers, and criminals on the Continent that Christie indicates in her French Riviera novel *The Mystery of the Blue Train* (1928).

The classical allusion and mythic underpinnings of Gladys Mitchell's *Come Away, Death* (1937) position her detective Mrs. Bradley as a ritualistic mediator between past and present; Poirot adopts a comparable role in *The Labours of Hercules* (1947). Within these crime narratives, the Continent is saturated with contradictory signifiers: exoticism and familiarity, ancient heritage and modernity, wholesome artistic and sporting pursuits, and the corrupt glamour of Monte Carlo—and towards the end of the 1930s, holiday and threat. In *The Crime Coast*, English

¹ For more on the periodization of the Golden Age, see Heather Worthington's *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction* (Macmillan, 2011).

tourist Paul Ashby articulates this imbrication of known and unknown: “I’ve no plans and very little money, but the idea of seeing the Mediterranean makes me feel as adventurous as though I were about to explore darkest Africa. I want to stay in France because I know the language pretty well” (Gill 6). By closely examining the social and spatial idea of Europe in Christie’s work, and positioning this in conversation with less-studied texts from the period, this essay suggests a collective and complex Golden Age navigation of the Continent as both an easily accessible space, made familiar through travel and cultural osmosis, and a fantastic, even mythical space, that functions outside English notions of reason and order and challenges Anglo-centric cosmology.

The particular focus here, then, is on narratives of leisure travel, pilgrimage, and quest. I argue that the French Riviera is an integral element of English social practices and aspirational escapism in Christie’s *Blue Train* and *Three-Act Tragedy* (1934). Europeanness informs not only the settings of these novels but adds further dimension to Poirot’s epistemology and function as a detective; as a European insider, he mediates between the familiar and the unknown for the English visitor. In *The Labours of Hercules* and *Come Away, Death*, classical Greek myth and literature shape narratives and methodologies of mystery and detection; travel in these texts becomes ritualized as quest and pilgrimage rather than pleasure jaunt. By evoking a shared cosmology between England and the Continent, Christie’s and Mitchell’s texts not only challenge the insularity of the Golden Age, but also English cultural heritage and notions of reason and order.

The shifting borders between the known and unknown, both in terms of narrative mystery and European terrain, can be framed in terms of the types of “mythical space” identified by Yi-Fu Tuan in *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (1977):

Mythical space of the first kind is a conceptual extension of the familiar and workaday spaces given by direct experience. When we wonder what lies on the other side of the mountain range or ocean, our imagination constructs mythical geographies that may bear little or no relationship to reality. Worlds of fantasy have been built on meager knowledge and much yearning. (86)

The promise of adventure and fulfilled desire that Christie and her contemporaries associated with the Continent—especially around the Mediterranean—resonate with this notion of “mythical space.” Even when characters and action are situated in England, the Continent functions as “the hazy “mythical” space . . . to which we do not consciously attend and which is yet necessary to our sense of orientation—of being securely in the world” (Tuan 87). As Paul Fussell notes, “The fantasies of flight and freedom which animate the imagination of the 20’s and 30’s and generate its pervasive images of travel can be said to begin in the trenches” (4). Travel is integral to Christie’s *oeuvre*, as scholars have noted; Light observes, along similar lines to Fussell, that “No doubt Christie was of her age in sharing the contemporary passion for trains, boats and planes. . . . Christie captures a middlebrow world of burgeoning tourism” (89). The second kind of mythical space articulated by Tuan relates to more usual understandings of mythology—a spatial representation of the answer to the question “How is the human being related to the earth and the cosmos?” (88). Travel in Christie’s work is not limited to tourism; in the *Labours* Poirot crosses the Continent on quests to solve mythologically inspired mysteries. As in the pilgrimage of *Come Away, Death*, the structuring principle of ritualistic travel allows the author

to veer away from the realism associated with the detective story genre, and use this mythical space to question Anglo-centric notions of justice and order.

Examining the idea of Europe in these texts involves a challenge to the vestiges of claims of insularity and enclosure clinging to the Golden Age fiction, and indeed to conservative rhetoric and narratives of Englishness. In 2017, then British Prime Minister Theresa May's speech in Florence simultaneously evoked the history of Florence as a center of a pan-European, England-inclusive Renaissance, and argued that "And perhaps because of our history and geography, the European Union never felt to us like an integral part of our national story in the way it does to so many elsewhere in Europe" ("A New Era"). This assertion of English insularity and isolation, and concomitant antagonism towards Europe, is part of what this essay aims to interrogate by considering Continental European mobilities and collective memory as an essential element of the English "sense of orientation—of being securely in the world" (Tuan 87). As Stewart King suggests in his study of *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934), "Transnational approaches . . . demand a new critical practice that unsettles the established relationship between text and context: between Christie and the Englishness in which the author and her *oeuvre* have been traditionally framed" (11).

Christie is the most studied of Golden Age authors, but studies often focus on Englishness within her work, or the relationship between England and Empire.² Studies of travel and foreign cultures and geographies in Christie's work have not often compared them with her Golden Age contemporaries in great depth, or examined the specific spatial and social anxieties and aspirations of the Continent, and the position it occupies within the Golden Age cosmology. Indeed, R. A. York dismisses Christie's idea of Europe altogether:

Special attention should be paid to those books which accord considerable importance to travel. We need not consider at length *The Blue Train* or *The Orient Express* in this context, since they provide little evidence of interest in the places through which the characters pass; essentially these are books about luxury. There is much more interest in Christie's treatment of what we now call the Third World. (135)

Light also eschews any in-depth analysis of Europe, suggesting that "In Christie's stories it is the journey, . . . which engross[es] the reader rather than the engagement with actually being abroad" (90). Brittain Bright's assertion of the value of "investigating place" in the Golden Age, supported by her application of theory from human geography, and her pioneering analysis of Mitchell's work, should be acknowledged here. Indeed, this essay builds on rather than contradicts Bright's starting point that structures of place reinforce these authors' typical modes: "Agatha Christie presents brilliantly deceptive inversions of the readers' expectations and prejudices, Gladys Mitchell experiments with the genre's Gothic heritage and popular psychoanalysis . . ." (7). However, when investigating mobilities, Bright elides travel inside and outside Europe into the typology of the "holiday novel, focusing on practices rather than places of tourism and arguing that

Instead, at the heart of these stories is the abstract idea of the holiday itself. . . . The crucial definition of the holiday, as a place, is not its individual

² For more recent work on Empire and Christie, see Christopher Prior's "An Empire Gone Bad: Agatha Christie, Anglocentrism and Decolonization" (2018).

location but its role in separating the participants from the normal and usual structures of life. The place of the holiday, then, might be best defined as *placelessness*. (105-6; emphasis in original)

Bright, then, views Christie's work through the lens of tourism, suggesting that within Fussell's differentiation between "modes of exploration, travel, and tourism, Christie's work is most often situated in the latter camp, 'that which has been discovered by entrepreneurship and prepared for [the tourist] by the arts of mass publicity'" (Fussell 39, qtd. in Bright 104). Here I suggest instead a combination of the three modes, with the detective taking on the role of "traveler":

If the explorer moves toward the risks of the formless and the unknown, the tourist moves toward the security of pure cliché. It is between these two poles that the traveler mediates, retaining all he can of the excitement of the unpredictable attaching to exploration, and fusing that with the pleasure of "knowing where one is" belonging to tourism. (Fussell 39)

Light describes Poirot as a "happy tourist, feeling as much at home in a guest house on the English riviera as on the Orient Express" (78), but considering Poirot to be a "traveler" in Europe affords a further mediatory dimension to his role as a detective—the crime is the terrain of the unknown, while his own professional and lived experience on the Continent offers orientation and a "sense of belonging." If detectives are considered travelers, then they mediate between "mythic space" and the "empirically known," a role that psychoanalyst-detective Mrs. Bradley embraces.

Light and Bright do not, then, integrate the idea of Continental Europe fully into the structures of English everyday life and imagination (and indeed they are not designed to do so). They do not account for expatriates—Europeans in England such as Poirot, or English residents on the Continent attracted by climate or favorable exchange rate. As Fussell observes, "travel on the Continent was melodramatically cheaper, especially in the early 20's, when the pound and the dollar were stronger than Continental currencies" (72). This explains the impoverished English Lady Tamplin, who "was a well-known figure on the Riviera, and her parties at the Villa Marguerite were justly celebrated" (*Blue Train* 52), as well as the fluid, cosmopolitan community of *Coast Crime*: "Major Kent described to Paul the life of the Southern fishing ports, with their floating population of painters, writers, and étrangers from all parts of the world" (Gill 7). I suggest, then, that the destinations of the "holiday" and "the journey" have their own social and symbolic significance.

In addition to integrating Europe into the cosmology and cartography of the Golden Age, this essay also intends to briefly note that Golden Age fiction did not happen in a vacuum; Golden Age texts are in conversation with other popular genres as well as "highbrow" modernist literature. Scholarship investigating travel, the representation of Continental European countries and borders, and the influence of European culture and heritage on Anglophone literature between the wars often excludes in-depth study of detective fiction. Fussell's *Abroad: British Literary Traveling Between the Wars* (1980) and Patrick R. Query's *Ritual and the Idea of Europe in Interwar Writing* (2012) are both relevant here, although both authors focus on the peregrinations of modernist authors such as James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence, and the philosophical contemplation of European influence and identity such as T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919). Fussell's and Query's work demonstrates both interwar English cultural interest in Continental

Europe and the frequency of mobility across Europe—and indeed, I return to Eliot’s notion of the “mind of Europe” when discussing quest and pilgrimage.

English stories of espionage and adventure—close cousins of the detective story—set on the Continent have received also less critical attention than modernist authors. Graham Greene’s thrillers such as *Stamboul Train* (1932) are an exception, perhaps due to Greene’s habit of alternating them with more serious literature. Sam Goodman observes that “Greene’s novels demonstrated how espionage fiction could react to and reflect the geopolitical circumstances of the period in an accessible yet erudite literary fashion” (4); I suggest that Golden Age detective fiction holds this same potential, although in the texts discussed here, references to the contemporary state of Europe are often oblique and euphemistic. Although less gritty than Greene, Christie and her contemporaries do gesture toward the mode of colorful spy and adventure stories involving transcontinental travel (such as *The Saint* series [1928-1983] by Leslie Charteris) in their cartography of the Continental imaginary. Christie invokes the pan-European master criminal archetype in *Blue Train*, where the mysterious M. le Marquis is “a *grand seigneur*, speaking French and English with equal perfection” (210) who commits murder in order to steal a flawless ruby known as the “Heart of Fire” (16). Christie also invented the Balkan nation of Herzoslovakia in *The Secret of Chimneys* (1925), a caper involving another famed jewel, political intrigue, and a secret revolutionary organization called “The Comrades of the Red Hand,” which Vesna Goldsworthy notes is “a sinister international web of conspiracy and theft which has little to do with Balkan history” (74). This is an adventure story in the “Ruritanian” tradition (Goldsworthy 74)³ in which “Popular novelists praised an increasingly ordered, civilised Europe, while desiring to preserve a blazing, chaotic corner of it in the Balkans” (230).

In *The Secret of Chimneys*, Balkan—and therefore European and English stability—depend on the restoration of the Herzoslovakian monarchy after an assassination; this stability is restored when the rightful English-educated heir assumes the throne.⁴ Similarly, in Margery Allingham’s *Sweet Danger* (1933), the Balkan kingdom of “Averna,” with its oilfield and natural Adriatic harbor, must come under English authority, “[t]he European situation being what it is” (30), aided by detective Albert Campion. While Sayers centers her detective novels in England, her England’s welfare depends on a stable Continent, as indicated by Wimsey’s off-stage missions for the Foreign Office: he is involved in a “slight frontier skirmish” (280) in Rome and Warsaw in *Gaudy Night*, and is sent to Rome, “like a plumber, to stop diplomatic leaks” and, rather fantastically, have a “soothing discussion with the Pope about a historical manuscript” (9) in *Busman’s Honeymoon*. Golden Age detective fiction, this essay contends, is neglected but fruitful terrain for developing existing discussions of place and travel in interwar literature, which have often excluded popular and genre fiction.

³ *Ruritania* is a term used as a shorthand for a fictional European country associated with violent political intrigue and the thriller and adventure story, first invented Anthony Hope in *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1894).

⁴ Herzoslovakia reappears in the *Labours* story “The Stymphalean Birds” (1940), in which Christie first presents the country as savage and sinister, only to reveal seemingly innocent Englishwomen to be criminal.

**“The Riviera in September was rather a favourite haunt”:
Leisure travel and tourism**

The intrigue and adventure of the spy-thriller mode invoke the more fantastic side of the “mythic space” of Continental Europe, but Golden Age detective stories also reflect routine and mundane habits and patterns of cross-Channel communication and travel. Christie’s *Death in the Clouds* (1935) shows Paris to Croydon flights to be literally an everyday affair, as does Freeman Wills Croft’s *The 12:30 From Croydon* (1934). As Robert Kuhn McGregor and Ethan Lewis observe, in Sayers’ *Nine Tailors* (1934), a death in an English village church is investigated by a “Wimsey who thinks nothing of running over to France to further the inquiry. His is a world of Daimler automobiles, scientific methodologies, and confrontations with news reporters. And it is a large, international world” (113). France is convenient for both business and pleasure; for Mr. Satterthwaite in *Three-Act Tragedy*, the Riviera is embedded within seasonal routines: “His round of house-parties was over, and the Riviera in September was rather a favourite haunt of his” (Christie 51). The glamor and gambling opportunities of Monaco offer his lovestruck friend Sir Charles Cartwright a way to forget his sorrows:

“... I shall clear out ...”

“Where to?” asked Mr Satterthwaite.

The actor made a careless gesture. “Anywhere. What does it matter?” He added with a slight change of voice, “Probably Monte Carlo.” (41-42)

In Monaco, Sir Charles is “immaculately got up in yachting costume. No more grey flannels and old sweaters” (52). As Bright notes, this change of costume to suit his surroundings “emphasises in Sir Charles’ case the changeability of the person” (124), with sinister significance. But this adaptability also demonstrates a casually cosmopolitan attitude, a familiarity with the rituals and codes of the Riviera. This “changeability” is also evident among representations of the less moneyed echelons of the English abroad. In *Crime Coast*, a fishing village near Marseille has become an enclave for artistic, Bohemian expatriates. Newly arrived Ashby observes, “[H]ere were the ‘bright young people in bright young jumpers.’ Everyone seemed to be burnt the colour of mahogany, and wearing what to Paul’s inexperienced eye was fancy dress” (22). Paul makes haste to equip himself with linen trousers, *tricot* (jumper), *beret*, and *espadrilles* (38), ostensibly to be less conspicuous when he ends up assisting in a murder investigation, but also to emphasize distance and liberation from English mores; the foreign clothing terms in the English text reflect the accessible exoticism and escape of the Riviera.

Perhaps *refraction* would be a more accurate term than reflection, in Christie’s case. As Goldsworthy notes, “While her train timetables are more precise, there is even less sense of the ‘real’ Balkan world in [*Murder on the Orient Express*] than in Greene’s [*Stamboul Train*], in spite of her greater concrete experience” (118).⁵ Indeed, Christie’s approach to place on the Continent is impressionistic and fleeting, drawing on popular imagery rather than realistic detail. Tuan suggests that

⁵ While the wider arguments of Goldsworthy’s *Inventing Ruritania* make sense in terms of the work of Christie and her contemporaries, some details are oddly inaccurate; she refers to “Victoria Revel” rather than Virginia Revel in *The Secret of Chimneys* (75) and states that “Christie travelled many times along the train route she describes, accompanying her first husband, Colonel Archibald Christie” (118), instead of both alone and with her second husband Sir Max Mallowan.

Countries have their factual and their mythical geographies. It is not always easy to tell them apart, nor even to say which is more important, because the way people act depends on their comprehension of reality, and that comprehension, since it can never be complete, is necessarily imbued with myths. (98)

In *Blue Train*, the Riviera is composed of advertising clichés, picture postcard scenes, and sensory impressions of warmth and light. Katherine Grey is accustomed to a dull life working for an old lady in an English village. Inheriting money on the lady's death, Katherine travels to the Riviera to visit distant cousins—her first holiday abroad. The Riviera fulfils her escapist fantasies: “Through the branches of mimosa, she looked out over the blue of the Mediterranean, and, whilst listening with half an ear to Lady Tamplin's chatter, [Katherine] was glad that she had come. This was better than St Mary Mead” (96). This generic commentary makes it understandable why Bright would foreground “holiday” over “place,” and Light “abroad” over “France,” as discussed above.

Nevertheless, this mythical geography is significant; it affords orientation and articulates escapism to the English at home—as Fussell observes, “The Mediterranean is the model for the concept *south*, and it is a rare Briton whose pulses do not race at mention of that compass direction” (131; emphasis original). Ashby's first encounter with the South of France is highly charged, showing the transformative potential of place and travel: “I suppose I was a bit sleepy still, and didn't have time to dissect things and look at them like a tourist. I know I felt, as I leant out of the window, that I had suddenly come to life in a new world—a world that really had been created by the sun. It was brilliant, hard, dry and clear, extraordinarily arresting and exciting” (Gill 21). Ashby assists traveler-detective Benvenuto Brown to solve the fantastical (and prurient) murder of an Argentine *femme fatale* found in a London hotel; “the body had on nothing but a number of magnificent jewels” (1). The investigation crosses the Channel to the Marseille criminal underworld; Brown is a cosmopolitan Englishman, and like Poirot, he is on familiar terms with Scotland Yard, the French *gendarmerie*, and the *demi-monde* of jewel fencing and cocaine smuggling. Under Brown's tutelage, Ashby shifts from tourist to explorer to traveler, to use Fussell's terms. Katherine, however, remains a tourist embedded in the “security of pure cliché” (Fussell 39), in contrast with Poirot the “traveler-detective,” for whom the Continent is familiar ground. As Merja Makinen suggests,

The playground of the rich and famous, the European Mediterranean allows the English to be “othered” within a context of transience and liminality, creating excessive performativity in the crimes set amongst jewelled, bright colours and emotions from which the reserved English characters are excluded but through which the observant wisdom of Poirot moves comfortably at home. (165)

In England, Poirot is Belgian and foreigner, but on the Continent he knows—and is known to—both *Sûreté* and *demi-monde*; in *Blue Train* he has a history with a crooked jeweler, and in “The Erymanthian Boar” (1940) it is stated that “Hercule Poirot respected the Swiss Commissionaire of Police. He knew him as a sound and dependable man” (704-5). His role as a “traveler,” then, is to mediate the Continental understanding of both crime and leisure pursuits to Katherine, the English innocent abroad.

Continental Europe in the Golden Age, then, is in some ways close to home; the familiarity of the French Riviera is reinforced by images of yearning and escape that articulate and situate English desires, as well as offering a locus of transformative social practices for moneyed visitors and impoverished or countercultural expatriates. The cosmopolitan detective, at home anywhere, becomes traveler-mediator to make the strange and unknown into the familiar and knowable.

“Some richness of the spirit?”: Quest and Pilgrimage

In the Riviera novels discussed above, traveler-detectives Hercule Poirot and Benvenuto Brown are distinguished not only from tourists but also English colonists of the Continent such as “Chubby Evans” in *Blue Train*; as Makinen observes, “The ex-pat Chubby Evans, living in Nice but with only a smattering of French, ‘was one of those staunch patriotic Britons who, having made a portion of a foreign country their own, strongly resent the original inhabitants of it.’ The little Englander mentality is clearly being ridiculed” (164). The mediation of Poirot and Brown in *Blue Train* and *Crime Coast* is modern; it is social and professional; their familiarity with English preconceptions and habits, as well as Continental criminal underworlds and law enforcement, creates an overarching stability. In *Come Away, Death* and in *The Labours of Hercules*, however, the mediatory capacity of the detective and the mythical geography of Europe are invoked in a symbolic and ritualistic fashion. Psychoanalyst-detective Mrs. Bradley examines the deadly consequences of the temporal instability created by a madman’s performance of classical rites in modern Greece, while Poirot imbues modern everyday crimes with mythical significance.

Employing archaic myth and classical literature are often considered the province of modernist texts such as James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), which reworks Homer’s epic poem into early twentieth-century Dublin life. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” T. S. Eliot declares that the poet must be a conduit for a tradition that is inseparable from the “mind of Europe,” arguing that

He must be aware that the mind of Europe—the mind of his own country—a mind which he learns in time to be much more important than his own private mind—is a mind which changes, and that this change is a development which abandons nothing *en route*, which does not superannuate either Shakespeare, or Homer, or the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen.

Relevant here is the European tradition and heritage that unites England with the Continent; indeed, *Come Away, Death* combines Shakespearean and Homeric allusion in accordance with Eliot’s model, taking its title from *Twelfth Night* and its epigraph from *The Iliad*. Mrs. Bradley and Poirot, then, mediate not only between the unknown of the mystery and the social and narrative code of revealing the mystery, but also between this pan-European mythical space and the “real” world of national identity and borders. This is made possible by ritualizing travel—the detective investigation becomes a quest for Poirot and a pilgrimage for Mrs. Bradley—allowing both detectives to mediate between ancient and modern Europe to make myths and mythical space visible and intelligible.

Mitchell’s novel deals with the secret rites of the “Eleusinian Mysteries” linked to the fertility goddess Demeter and her daughter Persephone, which date back to at least 800 BCE. Archaeologists and classicists have still not fully uncovered the nature of these rites, but Mitchell presents an unorthodox thought experiment:

“And what were the Mysteries?” [asked Mrs Bradley].

“Nobody really knows. But Rudri thinks—or says he thinks—that if one could reproduce all the conditions, one would find out.” (11)

Fully reproducing these conditions—mapping an ancient pilgrimage across 1930s Greece and Turkey—requires a re-wired cosmology, a tapping into the “mind of Europe” on an unconscious rather than intellectual level. If the form of the ritual is observed, the substance should emerge; this reversal of cause and effect, signifier and signified, the symbol and the real, is shown to be a madman’s logic and a dangerously de-stabilizing undertaking leading to murder. The disparate pilgrims are led by “mentally unbalanced” (306) Welsh amateur archaeologist Sir Rudri Hopkinson, and include three small boys, Sir Rudri’s daughter Megan, half-Greek (and therefore handsome but arrogant and amoral) blackmailing photographer Armstrong, various young people with intense attachments and antipathies to each other, and detective-psychoanalyst Mrs. Bradley, who treats Sir Rudri and contains his fanatical excesses. Bright comments that *Come Away, Death*

expands upon the idea, introduced in *The Mystery of the Butcher’s Shop* [1929] that a storied environment can play upon a suggestible mind, with potentially dangerous results. Indeed, specific places in these novels so dominate the narrative that they assume a disproportionate influence over the narrative place as a whole. (143)

We see this “domination” when Mrs. Bradley broods over Sir Rudri’s growing obsessiveness:

Least of all did she like this preoccupation with the idea of bloody sacrifice at Mycenae. The legends of the Atridae hung brooding over the heavy, broken walls, about the Lion Gate, and round the unguarded graves. The dark passion of Clytemnestra, the anguish of young Orestes, made heavy the lowering atmosphere, soaked beyond bearing already, with the heat of dead air before a storm. (156)

Indeed, Sir Rudri, the “dogged idealist and romancer, proceeding ploddingly the while along the petrol-haunted, dusty Sacred Way [the ancient pilgrim trail from Athens to Eleusis] which now led, in the age of progress, the world no longer young, from one Greek slum to another” (43), is so seduced by site-specific myth that he leaves his own age behind, desiring to enact the ritual literally rather than symbolically. He considers sacrificing a cow, then the boys, and eventually views his daughter Megan as Iphigenia, meaning danger both to her life and then her agency and happiness—in the *Iliad*, Iphigenia was sacrificed to Artemis by her father Agamemnon of Mycenae to guarantee fair winds for the Trojan War.⁶

Place is key to Sir Rudri’s lability; as Query suggests, “pilgrimage, a ritual action attached to a geographical sacred space, brings the past into contact with the present and the natural with the supernatural” (58). Mrs. Bradley pauses Sir Rudri’s slippage into the past by entering into his cosmology, thwarting his plan of child-sacrifice by employing classical cadence and epithet: “Is this the manner in which you make sacrifice to the Far-Darter Apollo, you wretched, ignorant man?” (143) and

⁶ In the twenty-first century, Nancy A. Evans (2002) has challenged the centrality of sacrifice to the “Eleusinian Mysteries,” but what the rites actually involved is still unclear.

embodying the past herself: “In the sunset light of the wild glen of the Atrides she stood before him like some ancient prophetess” (142). This confrontation signifies more than a conflict between an insane man and a psychoanalyst, or a potential criminal and a detective—it is a clash between two different cosmologies that share the same origin myths. Sir Rudri’s class, profession, and education suggest an indoctrination into classical myth and language from his childhood; as Fussell recounts, “One could point to the Mediterranean as ‘Rome’ in the largest sense, the place where the writings construed at school originated” (135). In *Come Away, Death*, an English “classical education” is at times associated with imperialism and acquisitiveness; the treasures and heritage of the ancient world have been commandeered: “she was the spit and image of a bit of sculpture—know it?—in the British Museum” (253-54). Sir Rudri intends to discover “Mysteries” rather than to rob graves, but this too suggests imperialistic acquisition, or at least appropriation, of the mythic space of another culture.

Mrs. Bradley’s thorough knowledge of classical Greek language and literature is evident in her quotations from Aristophanes and Homer, but her navigation of “mythic space” is motivated by her professional practice of healing and mediation, not a desire to conquer. As Bright remarks, as a Freudian psychoanalyst (19) Mrs. Bradley’s concern is the unconscious: “The absent or displaced information in the novel is precisely that which must be put into place by the detective, much as the psychoanalyst must discover the patient’s unconscious motivations in order to effect a cure” (146). Sir Rudri’s wife Marie Hopkinson exclaims of her husband and son, “Of course, they can’t bear the sight of each other! Too terribly Freudian and Oedipus. You’ll understand all that” (16). For Mrs. Bradley, the pilgrimage, and the ritual actions of *Come Away, Death*, signify the “unconscious,” so her task is to detect what conscious literal actions—murder—the ritual is concealing, or displacing, and for whom. Not only does Greek myth interpreted by Freud allow Mrs. Bradley to fill in the blanks—“The horns gave me the bow. Dick as accessory, the bow as lethal weapon, the Homeric ritual connected with the death of Io, all gave me Megan as the murderer” (317)—but the pan-European adoption of Greek myth as a foundation for understanding the human psyche via the Austrian pioneering psychoanalyst Freud is emphasized.

The “Eleusinian Mysteries” remain unresolved, but Mrs. Bradley’s quest to discover the murderer of the half-Greek blackmailer Armstrong is successful. This knowledge does not lead to retribution in terms recognized by the “age of progress,” or the English, however—there are no consequences for the murderer, although her identity is widely known:

“And what’s more,” Marie Hopkinson continued, “one doesn’t feel the same [in Greece] about these things—murder, and being suspected of it, and regarding it as something belonging to the Sunday papers, and so on. One remembers all the old stories—one sees things as Homer saw them, and as Aeschylus and Euripides and darling Aristophanes saw them—and they seem—death seems—trivial compared with—I don’t know how to put it—great things looming, and slaves’ lives meaning nothing, and fate hovering—great wings, great mountains, great, clean, sweeping skies.”

Mrs Bradley broke into involuntary, unseemly laughter. (309)

Had Sir Rudri literally rather than symbolically sacrificed his own daughter Megan-as-Iphigenia to Artemis, his crime would have been, according to the logic of dramatist and author of the *Oresteia* Aeschylus (c. 525–c. 456 BCE), “inexpiable”

(xv), leading to pursuit by the Fates. Denys Page's introduction to Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* describes the contemporary view of justice: "It is the will of Zeus that justice should govern men in all their dealings. The transgressor goes his way at his peril; retribution will overtake him at the end" (xiii). However, as neither fate nor the law punish Megan, her act is perhaps, according to *this* cosmology, not a crime.

Marie Hopkinson's comment that "Athens isn't like London" (309) is not criticizing the Greek police; they are "Quite on English lines, and no lethal weapons of any kind" (270), but she does view going to the police as "sordid" (309), an unnecessary human element in an archetypal mythic drama. Mrs. Bradley happily conspires; her notes are "indecipherable by anybody but herself" (302), reflecting the difficulties of deciphering fragments of ancient script. This conspiracy to subvert modern understandings and practices of crime and punishment by privileging timeless and mythic justice suggests Eliot's term "historical sense," "which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together." This "historical sense" in Mitchell's novel, then, not only emphasizes Mrs. Bradley's position as a mediator between past and present—in this case interpreting the present according to the rules of the past—but also subverts the popular and critical perception of the neat endings and denouements of Golden Age fiction.

Mitchell's navigation of a fateful space outside English law and order, and her creation of a detective who refuses to abide by generic convention or the rule of law, echoes, of course, *Murder on the Orient Express*; as Makinen notes, "All this [the crime, investigation, and resolution] occurs on the train while it is stranded in Yugoslavia, outside of time and normality, the one country that does not place police on the train while it travels through their country" (165). This ambiguity and suspended "normality" are evident throughout the *Labours*, particularly the travel stories. If the Riviera, for Poirot, is like going next door, in the *Labours* Poirot, like Hercules, travels to the ends of the known world.

Inspired by a conversation with a classically educated friend, Poirot wonders what he has missed as a professional policeman: "some richness of the spirit? Sadness crept over him. Yes, he should have become acquainted with the Classics" (646). Poirot decides that although the Greek hero Hercules was a "large muscular creature of low intelligence and criminal tendencies!" (647), he could translate his namesake's heroic deeds into a modern "ridding the world of certain pests" (648). The *Labours*, then, are mysteries "selected with special reference to the twelve labours of ancient Hercules. Yes, that would not only be amusing, it would be artistic, it would be *spiritual*" (648; emphasis in original). Unlike in Mitchell's novel, there is no confusion between literal and symbolic action or reversal of real and representation; the crime, or mystery, comes first and is then situated within the mythic framework. Query notes an "intimate" relationship between ritual, myth, and symbol, going on to determine that "ritual is action. This distinguishes ritual from myth, from which it derives, and from symbol, with which it is frequently carried out" (17). In "The Apples of Hesperides" (1940), Poirot seeks a stolen jeweled chalice at the edge of Europe, in Ireland:

Hercule Poirot had the feeling, not uncommon in those who come to Inishgowlen for the first time, that he had reached the end of the world. He had never in his life imagined anything so remote, so desolate, so abandoned. It had beauty, a melancholy, haunted beauty, the beauty of a remote and incredible past. . . . It was a land where common sense and an orderly way of life were unknown. (825)

This idealized Celtic periphery is far from the troubled relationship between England and its former colony in 1940; this is a romanticized “mythic space” beyond politics even as it is beyond rationality. Nevertheless, it contains the familiar: “Not very far away he had heard the toll of a bell. He understood that bell. It was a sound he had been familiar with from early youth” (825). Poirot’s youth in Catholic Belgium means that he is able to orient himself and interpret the bells, as well as converse with the Mother Superior of the Convent in a shared idiom. Indeed, the ending to the story is not “orderly” in a generic sense—Poirot recovers the chalice to its rightful businessman owner but persuades him to restore it to the Convent. The invocation of the myth here creates the ritual journey of the quest; the assigning of symbols places Poirot in the position of mediating between past and present, and the mythic space—or “*spiritual*”—and the pragmatics of the detective fiction genre.

A similar “spirituality” infuses the sacred quest of “The Arcadian Deer” (1940), fittingly the story of a mystery but not a crime. A handsome English mechanic (“Yes, a Greek god—a young shepherd in Arcady,” muses Poirot [691]) falls in love with a beautiful young woman with “hair like wings of gold” (691). The mechanic presumes her to be a famous ballet dancer’s maid, and they spend an idyllic pastoral afternoon of “enchanted hours” (699) together before she vanishes. An intrigued Poirot travels widely across the Continent to track down the maid and the ballet dancer, who had played “the lovely flying Hind, eternally pursued, eternally desirable” (700). He discovers a grave in Campo Santo at Pisa:

So it was here that his quest had come to an end—here by this humble mound of earth. Underneath it lay the joyous creature who had stirred the heart and imagination of a simple English mechanic. (699)

And yet, this is an unsatisfactory conclusion to a ritual quest: “Was it the stirring of spring that made him feel so rebelliously disinclined to accept this final verdict?” (699). As Tuan suggests, “The small worlds of direct experience are fringed with much broader fields known indirectly through symbolic means” (88); the symbolism of spring and rebirth here incites a further journey, not a descent to the depths of Hades to rescue Persephone, but an ascension to the heights—Switzerland. At this elevation, normality is suspended; this is not a space for winter sports enthusiasts or tourists: “Here, he thought, really was the world’s end. This shelf of snow—these scattered huts and shelters in each of which lay a motionless human being fighting an insidious death” (700). It becomes clear that the dancer and the maid who delighted the mechanic and for a few hours “walked with him in Arcady” (702) are one, although she can no longer dance—she prefers to remain a myth rather than face the indignity of being a flawed human. Poirot’s *Labour*, then, is to persuade her to defy her “fatalistic nature” (698), leave the space of myth and memory where she is resigned to her death, and return to the human world to find happiness with the handsome mechanic.

Mediating between myth and modernity is a complex, and partially unsuccessful, process in these texts. Discussing the mode of the Golden Age, Light argues that

The non-heroic and the de-consecrated tend to go hand in hand. It is hard to imagine, for example, a murder in a vicarage in 1850, or even 1880, as an object of entertainment for the respectable reading public. Crime in Christie’s novels comes less and less to be a matter of outrage; the fiction lacks a sense of awe or of the violation of the sacral. (71)

It may seem that both Mitchell and Christie are intent on a project of desacralization, undercutting any “sense of awe” towards classical Greece as an ideal. *Come Away, Death* and the *Labours* open with quotations from Homer, rapidly made bathetic by modern disillusionment. As Mrs. Bradley sails into Athens, she perceives “the smell of sewage, which seemed, like a siren-song, to emanate from everywhere” (7), while Poirot muses:

These gods and goddesses—they seemed to have as many different aliases as a modern criminal. Indeed they seemed to be definitely criminal types. Drink, debauchery, incest, rape, loot, homicide and chicanery—enough to keep a *juge d’Instruction* constantly busy. (648)

Through the ritual pilgrimage and quest in Europe, however, what emerges from Mitchell’s and Christie’s narratives is a pan-European notion of the sacred, informed by *pre*-Protestant (Catholic and classical) ritual. The vicarage, in these texts, does not exist at all, although elements of Christian ritual do. Query identifies three key “ritual practices” in modernism: “verse drama, the Eucharist, and the bullfight” (2). Christie gestures towards these: “The Apples of the Hesperides” refers to Holy Communion (and the Holy Grail), and in “The Cretan Bull” (1940), Poirot saves a “magnificent” strong young man: “He is the young Bull—yes, one might say the Bull dedicated to Poseidon” (757) from being sacrificed by his father figure. Mitchell’s chapter epigraphs from Aristophanes’ *The Frogs* (405 BCE) are verse comedy rather than verse drama, but they attach theatre and spectacle to the detective narrative. Her version of the “bullfight as a sacrificial rite” (Query 157) is an old cow found with its throat “cut according to Homeric tradition” (Mitchell 166). Following this discovery, “Mrs. Bradley gave Megan some wine for which she thanked her. But, raising the cup in the air, she poured the wine in a great splash onto the dusty ground” (167). This action subverts the Eucharist into a pre-Christian libation to the Gods, in a similar vein to the sacrifice of the cow. *Come Away, Death* and the *Labours*, then, do not reject the idea of the sacred, nor of awe—instead, they reframe and reposition myth via subverted ritual.

Bordering the Golden Age

This essay has attempted not only to gesture beyond a focus on English community in Golden Age fiction, but also to establish the position of this community within a complex and unstable “mythic geography” of Europe. In the introduction to this essay, I noted that we are told of Wimsey that “The map of Europe was familiar ground to him” (*Gaudy Night* 56), while *Come Away, Death* and the *Labours* demonstrate that the same applies to Mrs. Bradley and Poirot. The cosmopolitan detective therefore not only solves mysteries but mediates between cultures and identities—and in these texts between past and present. While both Mitchell and Christie invoke myth and legend throughout their work, the invocation and construction of ritual and Greek myth in the texts discussed here go beyond the mapping of the social and geographical proximity of the Continent to England—presenting England as a close neighbor to the Continent—to delineate a shared history, myth, and epistemological terrain for England and Continental Europe. As Query writes, “the idea of Europe begins with the bull. In the myth, [Greek God] Zeus, disguised as a bull, abducts the Phoenician princess Europa and takes her to Crete” (109).

As the 1930s drew to a close, so did the Golden Age imaginary of a mythical space of a Continental Europe that affords fantasy, cultural enlightenment, and a secure sense of “being in the world”—or being English in the world. *Hercule Poirot’s Christmas* (1938) explicitly references the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). In the Switzerland-set *Labour* “The Erymanthian Boar” (1940), an American tourist comments that a fellow visitor is, like Freud in 1938, a Jewish psychoanalyst “turned out of Austria by the Nazis. Say, I guess those people are just crazy!” (707). Mitchell’s preoccupation with blood sacrifice and ruined civilizations, as well as her hints at the fragility of national borders, can be read in light of an increasingly uneasy Continent; the pilgrims visit Ephesus, an ancient temple with a palimpsestic history: “Artemis was worshipped hereabouts, in various guises, well into Christian times. The Greeks first, then the Romans, and afterwards the early Christians worshipped here” (250). England’s proximity to Europe begins to seem a threat rather than a fantasy. In *Gaudy Night*, Sayers suggests imminent ideological and military war; one of the crimes committed in an Oxford women’s college is “the burning of Miss Barton’s book in which she attacks the Nazi doctrine that woman’s place in the State should be confined to the ‘womanly’ occupations of Kinder, Kirche, Küche” (440). As with the imagining of the effect of Balkan instability on England in Golden Age thrillers, these hints of future conflict are predicated on a sense of deep connection between England and Continental Europe—even if the crimes that were to be committed there would be too vast for modern detectives or mythical heroes to resolve.

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