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A Garden of One's Own, or Why Are There No Great Lady Detectives?

Shelby Moser and Michel-Antoine Xhignesse[1]

Abstract

Although the character of the "lady detective" is a staple of the cozy mystery genre, we contend that there are no great lady detectives to rival Holmes or Poirot. This is not because there are no clever or interesting lady detective characters, but rather because the concept of greatness is socially constructed and, like coolness, depends on public acclaim and perception. We explore the mechanics of genre formation, arguing that the very structure of cozy mysteries precludes female greatness. To create a "great" character, the author cannot just endow her with certain attributes; she must actively work to overcome her audience's tendency to import structures of oppression into the story, and she must wrestle against the conventions of the genre. In doing so, however, authors risk setting their stories in a wholly different genre.

Keywords: genius, genre, literature, mysteries, truth in fiction, reality assumption

1. Introduction

There is no shortage of lady detectives in English-language television series. These range from the early days of Madame Liu-Tsong (1951), Nancy Drew (1977–78, 1995, and 2019–23) and Miss Marple (intermittently 1984–92 and 2004–13) to the more recent Hetty Wainthropp (1990 and 1996–98), Mrs. Bradley (1998 and 2000), Rosemary Boxer and Laura Thyme (2003–07), Miss Fisher (2012–15), and Ms. Fisher (2019 and 2021). But it is telling that, until recently, "lady detectives" (to borrow Miss Fisher's idiom) have been largely relegated to the "cozies": mysteries that downplay sex and violence and are typically set in small communities. The cozy mystery is the refuge of the amateur sleuth, whose naïve determination or keen eye for detail solves crimes which stump trained policemen.

Recently, female investigators have helmed grittier mysteries as well, such as *Prime Suspect* (intermittently 1991–2006), *Happy Valley* (2014, 2016, and 2023), *Paranoid* (2016), *Top of the Lake* (2013 and 2017), and *Bancroft* (2017 and 2020). But

[1] Author order is alphabetical; authorship was shared equally.

despite the popularity of woman-led detective fiction, there is a shocking lack of great lady detectives to rival Holmes or Poirot in either their fictional accomplishments, or their real-world acclaim. This is not to suggest that stories about lady detectives are not *popular*, nor that there are no excellent, interesting, or clever lady detective *characters*. Indeed, those mentioned above represent just a few who are beloved by many.

Even so, we argue, they aren't *great*. Genius has a whiff of the essential about it: we commonly think that to qualify as a genius in some domain someone must stand head and shoulders above their contemporaries in terms of intelligence or talent and creativity. But the reality is that simply possessing these qualities is never sufficient for attributions of genius, as feminist art history has long made abundantly clear. Greatness, like coolness, is a matter of public acclaim or perception, and that can only come when someone's contributions are recognized for what they are.[2] But lady detectives are less highly regarded within their own fictional worlds than their male counterparts and, in turn, are less likely to have their qualities recognized by real-world audiences. Our contention is that lady detectives are not excluded from the company of the greats by their inferior intellects or ingenuity but rather because of oppressive structural factors inherent in the genres to which they are relegated.

We think that the case of lady detectives offers an especially instructive example of this phenomenon. Here, genre conventions introduce and maintain the gendered disparity between fiction's "great" and minor detectives, which is intimately linked to the roles lady detectives occupy in their fictional worlds and the ways in which these reflect the real world. Lady detectives are products of their time in a way that their male counterparts are not, and this is especially easy to pinpoint when we consider (1) the sleuth's material circumstances, (2) the role expertise and genius play in the narrative, and (3) the amateur's interactions with institutionally sanctioned authorities. The result is that it can be incredibly difficult for authors to overcome our pernicious cultural tendencies—perhaps even impossible in some cases.

2. Genius and Manateurs

Linda Nochlin's ([1971] 1988) groundbreaking essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" stirred art history from its dogmatic slumber by pointing out that our application of the terms "genius" and "great" are loaded with unquestioned and often unconscious assumptions about the history and practice of art-making. The Old Master's place in history, she contended, was assured not so much by quality of workmanship as by a series of economic, legal, and social conventions which presented structural obstacles to women's equal participation in

[2] Although the two seem to differ insofar as attributions of personal genius can be made posthumously, as with van Gogh or Poe.

the artworld. The result is a narrow conception of artistic value that sees the art-historical canon systematically devaluing women's contributions, such that no women are numbered among art history's greats.

"The fault," Nochlin argued ([1971] 1988, 150), "lies not in our stars, our hormones, our menstrual cycles, or our empty internal spaces, but in our institutions and our education." Partly, this is because women's contributions have often been erased wholesale from art history, so that we have attributed works such as the *Portrait of Charlotte du Val d'Ognes* (1801) to Jacques-Louis David rather than to Marie-Denise Villers, or *Fountain* (1917) to Duchamp despite correspondence suggesting it may have been his friend Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven's instead. But it is also because the domestic and dowry arts (e.g., embroidery and tapestry), which have been almost exclusively in women's historical purview, occupy a great deal less of our art-historical imagination than painting and sculpture. Institutional biases have also had their effect: along with an expectation that women's talents better served the private than the public sphere, cultural conventions and Academy regulations prevented women from accessing the training required of "proper" artists. Together, all these factors made a rise to professional status or "genius" less attainable, especially prior to the twentieth century. As we will see, similar obstacles plague lady detectives and help to explain why they are, first and foremost, mothers, housewives, spinsters, and retirees, rather than consulting detectives. In her fictional world, a lady detective's public role is primarily that of a *woman* (and occasionally that of gardener or heiress), whereas her male counterpart is free to have his public role reflect his choice of hobby.

Among cozy mysteries, the most renowned detectives are the male amateurs who solve crimes for sport: Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, and Lord Peter Wimsey, for example.[3] But professionals such as Tom and John Barnaby, Armand Gamache, and Jules Maigret are no slouches, either. All the same, these characters share several important traits in common.

First, and most prominently, they are widely hailed as great by their fictional colleagues and contemporaries, who stand in awe of their towering intellect. These guys don't just solve crimes; they do so by being exceedingly clever with what can only be described as inconsiderately paltry evidence. Holmes is the worst offender on this score, since he is constantly using his quasi-magical powers of memory and

[3] Some may balk at numbering these among the cozies since the genre was only named in the late twentieth century. But although the term was coined late in the game, those late authors explicitly took themselves to be hearkening back to the literary tradition that flourished in the Golden Age of detective fiction, the 1920s and '30s, but which dates back at least as far as the Holmes canon (1887–1927). It is also worth noting that these are all routinely publicly cited as early cozies.

observation to perform astounding abductive leaps. Recall, for example, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1901–02), when Holmes accurately describes Dr. James Mortimer (under thirty, amiable, unambitious, absent-minded) and his dog (a curly-haired spaniel), sight unseen, from Mortimer's walking stick, which the dog is in the habit of fetching. The great male detectives enjoy a kind of doubled fame: not only are they famous geniuses in their own fictional worlds, they are also the most celebrated detectives among real-world audiences, most of whom would be hard-pressed to name a single *real* detective, amateur or professional—let alone the world's greatest.

A subtler clue that these men are the little grey cells behind the operation is manifested in the person of their assistant—Barnaby's collection of detective-sergeants, Gamache's Beauvoir, Holmes's Watson (and Lestrade), Poirot's Hastings (and Japp), and Wimsey's Bunter (and Parker)—who, in his own bumbling way (for he is mostly a he) and with his precipitate theorising, acts as a cipher for the audience. For readers and viewers, there is no surer sign of the detective's ineffable brilliance than hearing an assistant voice one's own theory of the crime, thereby ensuring its falsity. But it is also worth noting that, in order to challenge (and showcase) their superior smarts, authors occasionally find it necessary to introduce an evil genius as a nemesis figure, such as Holmes's Moriarty or Poirot's Stephen Norton.

Second, the great men in question are almost invariably men of means. To be sure, Barnaby, Gamache, and Maigret are all law enforcement professionals who work for a living, although their activities and monetary insouciance suggest healthy salaries. More to the point, the great *amateur* sleuths—Holmes, Poirot, and Wimsey—all enjoy privileged backgrounds which enable them to lead leisurely lives only occasionally punctuated by episodes of detection. Holmes and Poirot, in particular, make a great show of only taking on cases which pique their interest; cheating spouses, lost pets, and thefts need not apply. Petty crimes are routinely passed over in favour of high-status crimes like murder—unless the mundane misdemeanor is somehow tied to a more fateful felony. The great male sleuth can rely on his considerable reputation as a genius to bring in challenging cases, without having to dirty his patent leather shoes by seeking them out. Note, too, that he solves these cases primarily for his own entertainment; solving crimes, for this class of gentleman, is first and foremost an intellectual pursuit, to be enjoyed as one enjoys the satisfaction of a puzzle's resolution.

Finally, the great "manateurs" are hardly *amateurs*; they are celebrated intellects whose help is frequently solicited by the authorities. While the local constabulary may at times resent the manateur's involvement in a case, they are only too happy to oblige the detective at the crucial moment, and to put their own institutional resources at his disposal. In fact, the sleuth's relationship to those authorities is distinctly patronising, involving equal helpings of condescension and ordering about.

3. Lady Detectives

Lady detectives are a different breed; in fact, they are much more realistic along all of these dimensions. Most, for example, must work for their suppers, with the partial exception of Miss Fisher (and, later, her niece Ms. Fisher), who grew up in extreme poverty but later inherited great wealth. Miss Marple is an elderly spinster, Rosemary and Thyme are professional gardeners, Hetty Wainthropp is an ageing housewife, Mrs. Bradley is an accomplished psychoanalyst, and Madame Liu-Tsong is an art dealer. They have neither the time nor the ability to act as consulting detectives, nor do they seek out challenges; instead, they stumble upon the bulk of their cases in their personal or work environments and must thus mobilize their hard-won topical expertise. Nor do they benefit from the existence of an archnemesis whose dastardly deeds serve to emphasize their intellect and endear them to befuddled authorities.

While manateurs are free to enjoy the intellectual satisfaction of a puzzle's resolution, by and large lady detectives must rely on their ability to meddle and tittle-tattle to solve the case so that they can get on with their daily routine. The lady detective does not have time to waste learning about obscure and tedious factoids or waiting for inspired cogitations. Instead, she must mobilize her extensive (noncriminal) education and apply it to the particulars of a case whose crucial clues are intimately tied to that expertise. Oftentimes, this results in the lady detective entering a baking competition, infiltrating a sewing circle, or restoring a neighbor's unruly garden to garner information from village gossip.

In this connection, it must also be observed that lady detectives are typically nuisances who are always underfoot. They must constantly work to have the value of their insights recognized by the authorities. Nowhere is this better illustrated than with Miss Marple, who regularly invites policemen to "hepeat" her insights by musing to herself within their hearing. Nor can the typical lady detective—Miss/Ms. Fishers and Mrs. Bradley aside[4]—rely on regular assistant assistance; she must instead rely on her own craftiness and network of local acquaintances.

None of this is to say that lady detectives lack education, ingenuity, or skill. On the contrary, just consider *Rosemary & Thyme*, whose settings invariably feature gardens and whose titular detectives must mobilize their botanical knowledge to solve suspicious deaths (usually in the garden itself). Laura Thyme (Pam Ferris) is a former WPC (Woman Police Constable) whose training and experience presumably included investigative best practices; Rosemary Boxer (Felicity Kendal), a retired university lecturer, has an intellectual background including a doctorate in plant pathology. But while these skills and credentials offer viewers a plausible backstory

[4] Another partial exception is Hetty Wainthropp, who is helped by a teenaged miscreant.

explaining the characters' involvement in the investigation, they seldom garner much esteem within the fictional world.

What Rosemary and Thyme conspicuously lack is a garden of their own, a patch of land over which they can exert complete control. Instead, they are itinerant workers labouring to complement and enhance a rich man's status, and their contributions go largely unappreciated. This situation is mirrored in their detective side-gig, where they constantly find themselves trespassing on a policeman's patch. In "The Cup of Silence" (a 2005 episode), for instance, they happen to dine at the same hotel as a reputable food critic when he is murdered; in the episode "Three Legs Good" (from 2006), their Regent's Park landscaping is interrupted by a three-legged dog who leads them to the flowerbed where her owner was murdered. Rosemary and Thyme are hired help and occasional witnesses, and the help is expected to speak only when spoken to. Rich Englishmen may seek them out to landscape their estates and foreign villas (because they're cheap), but nobody pays much attention to their botanical experience or investigative insights, even when these are directly relevant to the case at hand.

The situation is not helped much by the fact that their stereotyped backgrounds put Rosemary and Thyme squarely back in their gendered places. Thyme, for example, retired from police work to start a family, only to be left by her husband for a younger woman. And Rosemary's second career as a gardener is the result of having been fired from her university position by a former boyfriend with an axe to grind. The unexceptional presentation of these predicaments serves as a subtle reminder that these women are not in the positions they find themselves in by choice, but by circumstance.

It is no accident, then, that it is the manateurs who dominate audiences' imaginations and whose stories are constantly recycled for film and television, to say nothing of new literary instalments. Their fame precedes them, their cases are often of national import, and their clients are typically the lords, ladies, and wealthy of the realm. It is no wonder that audiences are swept along into their wakes and think little of the humdrum working-class mysteries which occupy lady detectives. Even a manateur's quirks of character and negative traits serve to underscore their intellects: Holmes must indulge his drug habit to overcome the soul-swallowing boredom he feels in the absence of a stimulating case, while Poirot's vanity mirrors his obsessive-compulsive fussiness, itself a manifestation of his orderly and methodical little grey cells. What could be more exciting than great men who lead primarily intellectual lives and occasionally condescend to help solve practical problems for their own entertainment? Certainly not ageing spinsters whose daily domesticity is disrupted by the appearance of a corpse, especially if their wit and ingenuity are not obviously on display. Bumbling about in the kitchen or garden makes for good reading and fun viewing, but it does not quite add up to inimitable genius.

Now, it could certainly be argued that cozies' usual settings mirror sexist attitudes because they are set in eras when sexism was the norm.[5] That is certainly true, but the subgenre is not limited to eras or detectives belonging to days of yore. Agatha Raisin, for instance, stands as an example of a contemporary lady detective who has yet to be regarded as a genius by her fictional peers. A London retiree, Agatha moves to the Cotswolds where she eventually becomes an amateur detective in her not-so-cozy new village. Although intelligent, she is often viewed by her village community as someone who blunders into the solutions to local murders.

There is an important corollary here to the artworld, where men's cultural output has historically been associated with the category of "fine art," while women's work was relegated to craft or simply to their regular domestic duties, where it could safely be taken for granted. As John Ruskin once put it,

> The man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention. . . . But the woman's power is for rule, not for battle—and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement and decision. . . . Her great function is Praise. (Ruskin 1886, 99)

On this model, painting a fresco for a chapel wall is a noble and challenging artistic pursuit, while weaving a tapestry, quilting a blanket, or embroidering a coat is just what a wife is supposed to do to keep her household warm and pretty. But should she turn her "needle-threading eye and taste for detail" to the fine arts instead, then, as John McEwan (1978, 25) put it, this "preoccupation [will] invariably [favour] presentation at the expense of content."

All this, in turn, has influenced the aesthetic value we are willing to ascribe to such works and established a precedent for the aesthetic evaluation of future such works.[6] What is more, as Nochlin ([1971] 1988, 15) observed, a career in fine art was far less professionally acceptable for women than men, since women in Western society have long been expected to operate within an "implicit context of passivity." In the nineteenth century, for example, the dominant view held that successful artworks created by men were expressions of artistic genius, whereas artworks

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[5] Our use of "sexism" and "misogyny" follows Kate Manne (2018, 78–80), who argues that sexism works to justify patriarchal social relations, while misogyny works to enforce them and ensure women's conformity.

[6] This persistent devaluation of women's cultural production can also lead to a concomitant and pernicious constriction of our art-*ontological* imagination (see Xhignesse 2018).

created by women counted as evidence of financial dependency and desperation. This situation is nicely illustrated by Emily Mary Osborn's 1857 painting *Nameless and Friendless*, which depicts a young woman who attempts to sell her artwork out of "plight rather than of power," and nervously awaits a skeptical art dealer's appraisal (Nochlin [1971] 1988, 15).

None of this is to suggest that, *qua* character or detective, we value Miss Marple less than M. Poirot. The point, rather, is just that the same gendered and misogynist real-world dynamics which govern cultural production find themselves reproduced in fictional worlds. This reproduction is hardly inevitable, but it *is* pervasive in the subgenre and sets the contrast class of properties against which future stories are judged.[7]

4. The Reality Assumption

So far, we have argued that lady detectives do not conform to ordinary stereotypes about genius manateurs. As a result, it would be easy to think that lady detectives are exceptional, that they represent exemplary departures from the cozy subgenre's gendered conventions. But that is not so; lady detectives are products of the very same gendered stereotypes which give us manateurs. In fact, lady detectives are subjected to a doubled set of constraints: the first stems from the kinds of stereotypes and sexist attitudes which the author makes true in their story, and the second from the fact that audiences must take similar attitudes to be true in the story, even if they explicitly disavow them. Allow us to explain.

It is widely agreed that stories are subject to background assumptions, which allow us to formulate principles of generation telling us how to draw inferences from what we are explicitly told to what is fictional. A story's *explicit* content consists of all the story-truths which are generated by the story's text. So, for example, it is explicitly true that Hercule Poirot has an upward-curled moustache, while it is not explicitly true in the Holmes stories that Holmes wears the deerstalker—although this *is* explicitly true in the 1939 films featuring Basil Rathbone and innumerable film and television adaptations since, most of which depict him wearing the iconic hat.

Implicit content, by contrast, consists of all the story-truths which are not generated by the story's explicit text—including, *inter alia*, entailed content as well as *background* content. So, for example, it is true in virtue of background in Stephanie Barron's Jane Austen mysteries that Jane's sister Cassandra was engaged to a man who died of yellow fever in the Caribbean, since Jane Austen's biography supplies part of the background against which the stories are set. A story's implicit truths will also include *entailed* content (e.g., stories set in twentieth-century Paris are set in France), and *imported* content (e.g., the things that happened to Miss Fisher in the first

[7] For more on the influence of genre on stories, see Friend (2012).

episode are also true in the show's last episode). Taken together, explicit and implicit content are generally thought to exhaust the realm of story-truth.

Stacie Friend (2017b, 29) has recently characterized the assumption that informs this analysis of background, which she calls the "Reality Assumption." We restate this assumption as follows:

> *Reality Assumption*
> Everything that is true in the real world is also fictionally true, unless excluded by the work.

According to the Reality Assumption, what is true in the real world is also true in a story, unless the story rules out some fact. The idea is that knowledge about the real world is *essential* to basic story comprehension. This is important because, as nearly everyone agrees, stories are necessarily incomplete, since it is not possible for an author to spell out all of a story's details in finite time.[8] Crucially, the Reality Assumption is deliberately formulated to rule out an author's or audience's *beliefs* about the world; what's true in the story is whatever *is* true in the real world, not simply what we *think* is true. This means, for example, that Ophelia's melancholy was actually caused by factors such as her isolation at court, her overbearing father, and so on, rather than by an excess of black bile.[9] The Reality Assumption, then, helps to guard against making fictionally true falsities and entirely mind-dependent beliefs.

The Reality Assumption is not itself a *principle of generation*, a rule for generating fictional truths; it simply articulates a defeasible presumption on our part which helps to inform our *actual* principles of generation, whatever these may be. This is especially helpful because stories leave open any number of questions, ranging from "silly" questions about the number of times Miss Fisher must trim her fringe to maintain her perfectly coiffed bob to more substantive questions about the murder rate in the county of Cabot Cove.[10] The Reality Assumption fills in some of these blanks, allowing us to conclude, for example, that despite her many, many talents, Phryne Fisher is still subject to the laws of gravity, or that somewhere between drinking sumptuous cocktails she eats regular meals.

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[8] See, e.g., Lewis (1978, 1983), Byrne (1993), Currie (1990), and Priest (2005).

[9] See Friend (2017a, 391), who specifically applies the Reality Assumption to Ophelia's case.

[10] The homicide rate for Cabot Cove has been estimated at about 149 per 100,000 (Townsend 2013)—putting it well ahead of Tijuana, Mexico, whose rate of 138 per 100,000 ranked it the murder capital of the world in 2022 (Statista Research Department 2022). On "silly" questions, see Walton (1990, 237–39).

Friend argues that the Reality Assumption should see us "storifying" (i.e., making fictionally true) facts about the world *as it is* (Friend 2017b, 37). This is because the alternative would (1) see us constrain story-truth too narrowly to the set of things about which inadequately educated historical peoples had *beliefs*, (2) see us storifying *falsehoods* about the world in the absence of any explicit content-level reasons to do so, and (3) invite significant imaginative resistance when it comes to stories from times and places with markedly different customs and mores (Friend 2017b, 37–38).[11]

The upshot is that authors tell stories in much the same way that philosophers specify possible worlds: by stipulating the most relevant ways in which they differ from the actual world and allowing the properties of the actual world to fill out as many of the remaining details as possible. Story-content which is implicitly filled out in this way is known as "background" content.[12] As Friend puts it, the Reality Assumption simply "articulates a bias in favour of reality" (Friend 2017b, 34). It is not itself a principle of generation which we can use to determine what is true in the story, but it forms the starting point for all such principles.

All this seems exactly right as far as we are concerned, but it is worth noting a telling accident of terminology: the Reality Assumption articulates *a bias*. It might be tempting to conclude, based on the preceding remarks, that the Reality Assumption inoculates story-worlds against the introduction of racist or sexist content via background. These are demonstrably false beliefs, after all, and are thus irrelevant to story truth unless the story somehow requires them to be true. Armed with the Reality Assumption, we might then think that we can rescue the intuition that some lady detectives, at least, really *are* great, since it is only misogyny which prevents them from counting as such. But this would be a mistake, as we will now explain.

5. Articulating Bias

In characterizing the Reality Assumption, Friend (2017b, 37) argues that the background it makes true is the world as it is, rather than as the author and intended audience take it to be. This is important precisely because it is *not* true that women are men's intellectual inferiors and emotional superiors, torture is good and necessary, and sacrifices court Oðin's favour. One might succeed in telling stories

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[11] Although Friend first formulates the Reality Assumption as such, the core thesis is shared by Marie-Laure Ryan's (1980) "principle of minimal departure," Gareth Evans's (1982) "incorporation principle," Lewis's (1978, 42) "background", Walton's (1990, 144) "reality principle," and John Woods's (2018) "world-inheritance thesis," prefigured by his "fill" conditions (Woods 1974, 63–65).

[12] "Background" comes from Lewis (1978, 1983), but we assume no particular analysis of it here.

according to which these are true, but they should never turn out to be true in those stories *as a matter of course*, in the absence of content-based reasons to think so.

This means that just what Stephanie Barron, Agatha Christie, Kerry Greenwood, Gladys Mitchell, and others actually believed about women is irrelevant, except insofar as these beliefs have informed the stories they tell. Conan Doyle, for example, famously believed in mediums and their ability to contact the dead, and a great many of his fellow Victorians and Edwardians did, too. Suppose he had intended for such things to be true in the Holmes stories but never found occasion to weave them in explicitly. Would they be true in the stories? We think not, since we would have no story-based reasons to depart from reality in this way, either at the level of explicit or implicit content. It might follow from these facts that it is true in the Holmes stories that most of the characters we encounter *believe* in contact with the shades of the dead, but we have no reason to think it really *is* true in the stories. The Reality Assumption is a defeasible norm, but it is one thing to license local departures from reality when the story requires them, and it is quite another to depart from reality willy-nilly, no matter how idiosyncratic an individual or community's beliefs.

So far, so good: if lady detectives are not great, then it is not because they lack the requisite qualities due to authorial intent or an audience's mistaken beliefs about their fictional prowess. Miss Marple and Mrs. Bradley really *are* all that clever, no matter what anyone thinks. But while it isn't true (*via* the Reality Assumption) in Stephanie Barron's Jane Austen mysteries that men are intellectually superior to women, it *is* true that the fictional world is populated by people who believe it to be the case, and who thus cannot or will not recognize Jane's genius. Similarly, consider Ophelia again: Shakespeare and his audience certainly would have thought she suffered from an excess of black bile, but we now know that must be false. The correct explanation for her melancholy is depression caused by isolation (or something along those lines), even though Elizabethan audiences would not have recognized it as such. But correctly identifying the cause of her melancholy does nothing to change the fact that she attributes her melancholy to black bile, as does everyone around her. The facts of the story, then, are not much changed: there are no humours, but everyone still thinks there are and attributes causal powers to them.

Returning to lady detectives, even if it isn't fictionally true that they are inferior to their male counterparts, it *is* fictionally true that their fictional worlds are populated by people who believe them to be so. Even sympathetic audiences, then, are compelled to indirectly import the structures of misogyny into their readings by hook, if not by crook. We know from the real world that despite their false basis, sexism and misogyny have all too real *consequences*; so, we might say that these things are true *about* the world of the fiction, even though they are not true *in* it. Because their fictional worlds are every bit as bigoted and oppressive as our own was and is, lady detectives enjoy little to no acclaim in their respective story-worlds and,

thus, cannot count as great-in-the-fiction. The Reality Assumption offers no panacea: structures of oppression such as misogyny can—and often do—operate through apparently neutral norms. This means that authors cannot simply rely on a character's attributes to make her great; they must actively intervene to counteract prejudice against their characters and to ensure their greatness is fictionally recognized, or to clue readers in. And here, unfortunately, they run into a second, and more significant, obstacle: the structure of the subgenre itself.

6. Genre

Genres are established as certain narrative elements coalesce and come to be frequently associated with particular story-types. So, for instance, mysteries are typically set in the real world and typically take place in the (author's) present day; they typically feature the commission of some crime, usually a murder, which must be resolved by story's end; they typically follow the exploits of some sort of detective; and typically offer up a closed set of suspects. These are some of a mystery's *standard* properties, the properties you would expect from your average mystery. We can also identify a genre's *contra*-standard properties, which are those which tend to count against a work's classification in the genre (e.g., being set in space is contra-standard for fantasy), and its *variable* properties, which don't matter much one way or another to classification in the genre (e.g., the detective's gender is a variable property of mysteries).[13] As a genre is established, the properties established by reference to its founding members become increasingly standard for it and help to define the contrast class against which a work's properties are subsequently judged standard, contra-standard, or variable.

A genre's standard properties are not usually necessary for belonging in the genre, although if any genres do have necessary properties, these will be standard for them by definition. Likewise, the possession of contra-standard properties is not fatal to classification in a genre, although possessing too large a subset of them is. Instead, we class stories in a genre when they satisfy some sufficient subset of its standard properties and don't accumulate too many contra-standard properties. This is not to say that our genre classifications are robust and clear-cut; on the contrary, it's often quite difficult to find a perfect fit. N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy (2015–17), for example, is a work of fantasy—set in a distant postapocalyptic future where the dead world's technology is so advanced as to be indistinguishable from magic to its current occupants, as well as to readers. Is it fantasy, sci-fi, dystopian, or apocalyptic

[13] Although the distinction between standard, contra-standard, and variable properties is rooted in Walton (1970), this particular discussion—in terms of *genre*—stems from Friend (2012; see esp. 188ff).

literature? Insist too much, and every story will have its own genre—much as most heavy metal bands today are the sole occupants of their sub- (sub-sub-, etc.) genres.

Returning to mysteries, then, we can easily identify exceptions to the standard properties listed above: some mysteries might not feature any crime at all (e.g., Donald J. Sobol's *Encyclopedia Brown* series [1963–2012]), some might be set in the distant past (e.g., Agatha Christie's pioneering *Death Comes as the End* [1944]) or the distant future (e.g., Alastair Reynolds's *Century Rain* [2004]), some might not follow a *detective's* exploits (e.g., Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Akroyd* [1926]), and so on. But even though these works all play against type in some way, they are still properly classified as mysteries because they adhere to many or most of the genre's other standard properties. (They may also be appropriately classified as simultaneously belonging to other genres—e.g., sci-fi, historical fiction, fiction *tout court*—provided these classifications are not incompatible.) The more a work deviates from a genre's standard properties, however, the less welcome its classification within that genre. A few deviations might make for a fresher, more interesting story, but too many deviations from the norm leave us with something else entirely, a work in a different genre.

To see why the structure of cozy mysteries presents such an obstacle to lady detectives' greatness, we need to get a handle on which properties are standard for the subgenre. On this score, recall the characteristics we sketched at the outset of this paper: (1) cozy mysteries are the purview of amateur detectives, usually an ordinary person who occupies a widely recognizable and relatable social role, (2) they feature quaint small-town settings and idyllic provincial locations, (3) sex and violence are significantly downplayed and typically occur offstage (e.g., murders often take the form of poisoning or a quick hit to the back of the head), and (4) they are often organized around the protagonist's occupation or hobby, which serves to put them at the heart of the action (such as it is). This hardly amounts to a robust definition of the subgenre in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, but as a description it's good enough to be getting on with.

The problem, then, is that the structure of a cozy mystery works against its protagonist's greatness—she's an amateur and a local busybody, not a famed sleuth to whom dukes and ministers turn when all else has failed. Unless the author explicitly works in her renown, as Conan Doyle and Christie did for Holmes and Poirot, the lady detective is relegated to a provincial curiosity. Likewise, the convention of stumbling across crimes—seldom of national importance—in the course of daily life also works to undermine the lady detective's claims to greatness. So, too, with the convention that the lady detective be a thorn in law enforcement's side. These conventions make the stories more fun to consume, and they make for interesting and relatable characters, but they don't speak much to their *greatness*, whether fictionally or extra-fictionally.

It is, of course, possible for authors to depart from a genre's standard properties. Miss Fisher, for example, is a wealthy heiress with a long string of conspicuously younger lovers (tastefully conquered off-screen)—in these respects, she plays entirely against type. But all the same, she is constantly underfoot, solves crimes as a hobby, and struggles for recognition from the authorities against whom she competes, and so on. Thus, even insofar as her stories introduce contra-standard properties for the subgenre, they nevertheless serve to highlight the standard properties against which they play and to reify the standard properties they incorporate. There is a difficult balance to be struck, since too great a departure will undermine the work's classification under the relevant genre.

Cozy mysteries are particularly closely associated with their quaint village settings and amateur sleuths. A more fast-paced urban setting invites the rather more sordid range of crimes associated with big-city life and makes a hobbyist's involvement that much more unlikely. Similarly, shifting to a professional detective invites issues of work-life balance to creep in, many of which tell against a woman's greatness (see section 7). The plight of a professional stuck in a provincial backwater does little to burnish the halo of genius; conversely, in order to climb the career ladder, the up-and-coming city slicker needs the kind of sensational crime and corruption which better characterizes the *noir* or hardboiled subgenres. Thus, although there are *many* television serials featuring very clever professional female detectives, such as *Prime Suspect*, *Happy Valley*, or *Bancroft*, these are not *cozy* mysteries. Moreover, their protagonists are typically portrayed as disaster-types who struggle to balance work, life, and their drinking habits with the need to solve a sordid (and often quite violent) crime—all of which are standard properties of hardboiled or *noir* detective fiction, and none of which sound all that *great*.

Where cozy mysteries are concerned, their establishment in the late nineteenth century and their flourishing in the 1920s and '30s meant that the attitudes of early audiences played a disproportionate role in determining their standard properties. Even where lady detectives and contemporary settings are concerned, we saw in section 5 that these women retain the same restrictive roles they inherited from the societies which determined the subgenre's standard properties. Lady detectives certainly represent a departure from the first cozies, but contemporary lady detectives still operate in the shadow of the subgenre's earliest installments.

The trouble here is just that the kinds of properties which count as standard for a genre are established very early on in the genre's history and are reified by subsequent works. Cozy mysteries—and lady detective stories in particular—remain in thrall to the kinds of properties which became standard when the subgenre first coalesced in the twentieth century—a time when gender norms significantly restricted women's flourishing. This is not to say that no woman-led mystery can

deviate from these norms—of course they can, and do! The point, rather, is that there is an in-built limit to how much they can deviate *and still count as cozy mysteries*. The end result is that the very properties which are standard for cozy mysteries—the features which define the subgenre—make it exceedingly difficult for lady detectives to be counted among the "greats" by either their fictional compatriots or real-world audiences.

To get a better handle on the constraints which genre conventions can impose on story-content, it may be helpful to consider the case of Harlequin romances. Sara Kolmes and Matthew A. Hoffman (2021, 31) have recently argued that these have a structure which necessarily precludes the objectification of sex, even if they feature a great deal of it. This is because it is part of the genre structure of romance novels that (1) the protagonists must ultimately love one another for their own sakes, (2) romantically entangled heroes and heroines are not interchangeable—they are uniquely important to one another, (3) the novels raise and dismiss the possibility of the heroine being violable by her partner, and (4) the heroine's active participation in the relationship is required in order to make it work (Kolmes and Hoffman 2021, 36–37). The points of view and desires of romantic heroines are constantly foregrounded, with the result that their autonomy is wholly undeniable (Kolmes and Hoffman 2021, 38). A romance novel simply does not objectify its heroine or its sexual content, even though readers are meant to take pleasure in that content. A novel which *does* objectify its heroine is, quite simply, not a romance novel; it belongs to some other genre, such as erotica or pornography.

Our point here is much the same: the structural features which have come to characterize cozy mysteries unfortunately preclude lady detectives' "greatness," despite writers', audiences', and critics' best intentions. These structural obstacles are not immutable, but they are so deeply rooted in the subgenre that they are incredibly difficult to shift without also shading into a wholly different subgenre. Recognizing a lady detective's greatness, either actually or fictionally, thus takes a great deal of additional effort and sympathetic reading and writing, none of which is helped by her amateur status or the relatively low status of her cases. To the extent that greatness depends on public recognition (either fictional or real), lady detectives are bound to have a harder time of it.

7. A Garden of One's Own

We have argued that there are no great female detectives, insofar as greatness is modelled by the likes of Holmes and Poirot. This is a provocative claim which is bound to rub many mystery fans the wrong way. Indeed, they may well be tempted to observe that even if our thesis holds true of cozy mysteries, it seems to run afoul of the many strong female leads *outside* the cozies. Characters such as Catherine Cawood, Jessica Jones, Marcella Backland, Lisbeth Salander, Nina Suresh,

and Dicte Svendsen, for example, do not bake pies, tend gardens, or laze about in overstuffed armchairs. These sleuths are grittier and generally *do* have training in crime and detection. Writing about art history, Linda Nochlin predicted that her thesis might inspire similar responses defending lists of reclaimed female artists. In response, however, she argued that producing such lists only serves to make us complicit in accepting and reinforcing the *status quo* for women, rather than critically reevaluating our concept of artistic genius. We think that much the same is true here, too.

The problem with lists of "great" lady detectives outside the cozies is precisely their rough edges, which leave us hard-pressed to characterize them as truly *great* detectives. On the one hand, rough edges are problematic across the board for attributions of greatness: a police officer who breaks the rules to get his man is properly described as "*corrupt*," not "great."[14] On the other hand, the rough edges which make male characters more interesting and human, and which are well-worn stereotypes of male genius—for example, alcoholism, an inability to maintain relationships, workaholism, and so on—serve to make female characters look tragically flawed instead.[15] This is not because such characteristics are inherently inimical to greatness, but, rather, because they count against the feminine ideal: the tenacity that makes a woman a good detective typically also makes her a bad *woman* or, what amounts to the same, a bad *mother*.[16] This situation closely parallels the widespread phenomenon of women's, but not men's, assertiveness or confidence being negatively coded, for example, as "bitchiness."

After all, it's one thing for a male detective to be a bad father because he is so wrapped up in the pursuit of justice, but it's quite another for his female counterpart to be a bad *mother*. Since the *noir* detective is prototypically a fallen character, the subgenre is bound to be particularly unforgiving of its female protagonists. *These* women are afflicted with alcoholism, insomnia, mental breakdowns, and PTSD; such flaws might make for excellent, relatable, or pitiable *characters*, but they hardly add up to a *great* detective. The lady detective's faults serve to highlight her vulnerability rather than to underline her greatness. As such, detective stories featuring rough lady detectives are often as limited in their ability to produce genius as the standard cozies in which the ladies bake and babble. What is more, any detailed consideration of the sources of these rough edges will reveal that they are significantly informed by traditional gender biases. This underscores another common convention which is

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[14] The same is arguably not true of the amateur, however, since they aren't invested with state power.

[15] We are grateful to Alice Everly for initially making this observation.

[16] That's not to say there cannot be any exceptions—the character of Sarah Lund (*The Killing*) might be one such.

instantiated by female detectives who are *portrayed* as strong characters but who succumb to the much-stereotyped "whims of the female."[17]

Let us return now to Rosemary and Thyme, who are regularly referred to as mere "gardeners" (cf. landscaper/landscape artist, plant pathologist) but who lack a garden of their own and of whom another character once said that "they don't strike me as being particularly brilliant" (in the 2007 episode "Enter Two Gardeners"). What is most striking about this offhand remark is that it does not, in fact, pertain to their status as amateur sleuths but rather to their *professional* status as gardeners (i.e., experts) hired to spruce up a theatre's surroundings. If they aren't particularly brilliant at their chosen profession, why should we ever think they might shine at their busybody *hobby*? But it also represents an in-world evaluation of their abilities. The conceit, of course, is that the assessment is wrong and leads to their systematic underestimation, which works to their advantage. Nevertheless, the conceit only works because we—as suitably informed contemporary viewers—understand that it reflects prejudices which are widespread in the real world *and* are reflected in the fictional world.

What cozies like *Rosemary & Thyme* ably demonstrate is just how incredibly difficult it is for fiction to overcome structures of oppression, since these are not limited to the fictional world's explicit content; they also suffuse the mechanics of our genres by helping to determine the properties which count as standard, contra-standard, and variable for those genres. There is a temptation to reassure ourselves that, so long as we recognize that Marple and Raisin are extremely intelligent and perceptive, that suffices to mark them out as great detectives. But to do so is to misidentify what makes their male counterparts great and to claim for women an altogether lesser kind of genius. It is to reaffirm the myth of the little grey cells, when in fact the recognition of genius is a substantially socially-constructed phenomenon.[18]

It is plausible that the possession of a great intellect is *necessary* for attributions of genius; but so long as such attributions involve public acclaim, it can never be *sufficient*. The problem for lady detectives, then, is twofold. First, the standard features of the genres in which we find them tend to undermine the fictional recognition of their accomplishments. Second, the myth of genius exerts sufficient influence over real-world audiences—despite its well-established falsity—that the same genre features which undermine the fictional recognition of lady detectives' accomplishments also undermines their *real-world* recognition. As a result, there are no great lady detectives.

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[17] Clavel-Vazquez explores this phenomenon in her 2018 article "Sugar and Spice, and Everything Nice."

[18] For a genealogy of genius and its gendered characteristics, see Battersby (1989).

This is not to say that it is impossible for there to be any great lady detectives, any more than recognizing the institutional underpinning of artistic genius means that it is impossible for there to be great women artists. If certain genres present insuperable structural obstacles to the recognition of women's accomplishments, then we need to either introduce new genres, or change the very properties that count as standard for the genre in the first place. Where the second of these is concerned, we have argued that the mere existence of brilliant lady detectives cannot effect that change on its own.

But genres are constantly changing, with new stories taking certain of their forebears' properties as standard; with sufficient momentum behind the move, it is conceivable that cozies could shift away from the standard properties that inhibit greatness to new properties which are more conducive to it (e.g., from low-status to high-status cases and clients). In this respect, it seems significant that cozies today are populated primarily with lady detectives, despite the storied male protagonists from the subgenre's early days. The mechanics of genre formation thus suggest that lady detectives' widespread presence makes such changes possible by putting pressure on which features count as standard for the subgenre. Miss Marple herself may not be a great lady detective, but she helped lay the foundations for a future lady detective who *is*. Writing her into being, however, will require careful attention to the structural properties of her genre and to how these interact with real-world prejudices.

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