



# DRAMA

C R I T I C I S M

V O L U M E

39



# DRAMA

C R I T I C I S M

Criticism of the Most Significant and Widely Studied  
Dramatic Works from All the World's Literatures

**VOLUME 39**

Lawrence J. Trudeau  
Project Editor



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## Preface

**D***rama Criticism (DC)* is principally intended for beginning students of literature and theater as well as the average playgoer. The series is therefore designed to introduce readers to the most frequently studied playwrights of all time periods and nationalities and to present discerning commentary on dramatic works of enduring interest. Furthermore, *DC* seeks to acquaint the reader with the uses and functions of criticism itself. Selected from a diverse body of commentary, the essays in *DC* offer insights into the authors and their works but do not require that the reader possess a wide background in literary studies. Where appropriate, reviews of important productions of the plays discussed are also included to give students a heightened awareness of drama as a dynamic art form, one that many claim is fully realized only in performance.

*DC* was created in response to suggestions by the staffs of high school, college, and public libraries. These librarians observed a need for a series that assembles critical commentary on the world's most renowned dramatists in the same manner as Gale's *Short Story Criticism (SSC)* and *Poetry Criticism (PC)*, which present material on writers of short fiction and poetry. Although playwrights are covered in such Gale literary criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism (NCLC)*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 (LC)*, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism (CMLC)*, *DC* directs more concentrated attention on individual dramatists than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries in these Gale series. Commentary on the works of William Shakespeare may be found in *Shakespearean Criticism (SC)*.

### Scope of the Series

By collecting and organizing commentary on dramatists, *DC* assists students in their efforts to gain insight into literature, achieve better understanding of the texts, and formulate ideas for papers and assignments. A variety of interpretations and assessments is offered, allowing students to pursue their own interests and promoting awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Approximately five to ten authors are included in each volume, and each entry presents a historical survey of the critical response to that playwright's work. The length of an entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention the author has received from critics writing in English and from foreign critics in translation. Every attempt has been made to identify and include the most significant essays on each author's work. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors sometimes reprint essays that have appeared elsewhere in Gale's literary criticism series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds twenty percent of a *DC* volume.

### Organization of the Book

A *DC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** consists of the playwright's most commonly used name, followed by birth and death dates. If an author consistently wrote under a pseudonym, the pseudonym is listed in the author heading and the real name given in parentheses on the first line of the introduction. Also located at the beginning of the introduction are any name variations under which the dramatist wrote, including transliterated forms of the names of authors whose languages use nonroman alphabets.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.

- The list of **Principal Works** is divided into two sections. The first section contains the author's dramatic pieces and is organized chronologically by date of first performance. If this has not been conclusively determined, the composition or publication date is used. The second section provides information on the author's major works in other genres.
- Essays offering **overviews of the dramatist's entire literary career** give the student broad perspectives on the writer's artistic development, themes, and concerns that recur in several of his or her works, the author's place in literary history, and other wide-ranging topics.
- **Criticism** of individual plays offers the reader in-depth discussions of a select number of the author's most important works. In some cases, the criticism is divided into two sections, each arranged chronologically. When a significant performance of a play can be identified (typically, the premier of a twentieth-century work), the first section of criticism will feature **production reviews** of this staging. Most entries include sections devoted to **critical commentary** that assesses the literary merit of the selected plays. When necessary, essays are carefully excerpted to focus on the work under consideration; often, however, essays and reviews are reprinted in their entirety. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- A complete **Bibliographic Citation**, designed to help the interested reader locate the original essay or book, precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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Rocha, Mark William. "Black Madness in August Wilson's 'Down the Line' Cycle." In *Madness in Drama*, edited by James Redmond, 191-201. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. Reprinted in *Drama Criticism*. Vol. 31, edited by Thomas J. Schoenberg and Lawrence J. Trudeau, 229-35. Detroit: Gale, 2008.

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# Agatha Christie

## 1890-1976

(Born Agatha Mary Clarissa Miller; also wrote under the pseudonym Mary Westmacott) English playwright, novelist, short story writer, and poet.

### INTRODUCTION

One of the most successful mystery writers in literary history, Christie is best known for her novels and plays, particularly *The Mousetrap*, which has played continuously since its premiere in London's West End in November 1952. With a run of more than 24,000 performances over nearly six decades thus far, it is the single most successful play in modern dramatic history. Altogether, Christie wrote or adapted nineteen works for the stage. In 1955 her play *Witness for the Prosecution* (1953), which she adapted from one of her short stories, was presented with an Edgar Award for Best Play by the Mystery Writers of America. Although some see her work as derivative of that of earlier mystery writers of the late nineteenth century, Christie is credited with introducing several innovations to the genre. Because of the popularity of her works and the intricacy of her plots, audiences who attend performances of Christie's plays are always asked not to reveal the endings, a request with which many critics have complied in their reviews.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Christie was born in Torquay, Devon, England, on September 15, 1890. Her father, Frederick Alvah Miller, was an American stockbroker related through his stepfather to the wealthy New York family the Pierpont Morgans, and her mother, Clarissa Margaret Boehmer, was the daughter of an English army captain. The youngest of three children, Christie was educated at home by her parents and tutors. When she was eleven years old, her father died and her mother's health began to decline. Christie attended a finishing school in Paris, where she studied singing and piano, and in 1910 she traveled to Cairo, where she formally came out into society. Prior to the outbreak of World War I she met Colonel Archibald Christie, a pilot with the Royal Flying Corps; they were married in December 1914. During the war she joined the Red Cross as a nurse, transferring to a pharmacy later on.

Christie took up writing mysteries upon a challenge from her elder sister. Her first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), was rejected by six publishers

before it was accepted, but as with several subsequent works, it was moderately successful with readers. In 1926 Christie had her first major hit with the novel *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and she became a literary sensation. At the time, she was grieving the loss of her mother, who had died earlier that year. She then discovered that her husband was involved with another woman. After a bitter argument one night, Christie became embroiled in a real-life mystery when she fled the couple's home in Berkshire and disappeared for nearly two weeks in December 1926. The public was shocked, and a police search revealed nothing until she was found checked in as a guest under an assumed name at a hotel in Yorkshire. Although there was speculation that Christie had staged a publicity stunt, she was diagnosed with amnesia and her whereabouts during that period have remained unknown. Archibald Christie divorced her in 1928.

Seeking adventure and a change of scene, she took an extended trip, traveling through Europe on the Orient Express and then on to Iraq. On her second trip to Iraq, in 1929, she met and fell in love with an English archeologist named Max Mallowan; they were married in September 1930. Christie's first play, *Black Coffee* (1930), debuted three months later. Traveling with Mallowan on his many expeditions to the East inspired Christie to set some of her best-known works in that part of the world or along the route she traveled, including the novel *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934). Mallowan served in the military in North Africa during World War II, and Christie returned to working in a pharmacy.

In 1947 Christie was commissioned by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) to write a radio play in honor of Queen Mary of England's eightieth birthday. The half-hour play, *Three Blind Mice*, was broadcast on May 30, 1947. The following year Christie adapted the radio play into a short story. She then expanded the radio play into a full-length stage play with the title *The Mousetrap*, which went on to become the longest-running stage production in modern theatrical history, with a long-standing contractual agreement that it cannot be produced outside of London's West End more than once a year. Additionally, it has never been published in the United Kingdom, to prevent potential playgoers from learning its ending.

Christie continued to write plays, as well as many works in other genres, over the course of her career, and some

of her novels and short stories have been adapted for the stage by other authors. In 1956 she was named Commander of the Order of the British Empire, for her literary accomplishments. In 1960 her husband received the same honor for his archeological studies, and he was knighted in 1968. In 1971 Christie received the country's highest honor for a woman, Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire. She died at her home in Wallingford, Oxfordshire, on January 12, 1976.

## MAJOR DRAMATIC WORKS

Christie wrote several original plays for the stage, but her biggest success by far was *The Mousetrap*. The plot is loosely based on a real incident of child abuse that occurred in 1945 at a farm in Shropshire, England, when a twelve-year-old boy named Dennis O'Neill, severely malnourished after months of neglect by his foster parents, was beaten to death by his foster father. The case was highly publicized throughout England and resulted in the overhaul of the country's foster care system. In Christie's play the foster mother, Maureen Lyon, is found murdered in her London flat prior to the start of the action. All of the other characters, each of whom could be the killer, are stranded during a snowstorm in an English country hotel. As with all of Christie's works, the plot twists numerous times to eliminate various characters as suspects until finally the real murderer is revealed.

*The Mousetrap* follows Christie's typical formula of placing her major characters, one of whom is the killer, in an isolated setting—often a country home. In her first play, *Black Coffee*, the setting is a manor house, where a scientist keeps his secret plans for a proto-atomic device. The scientist summons Detective Hercule Poirot to his house to help him protect the plans, but when Poirot arrives he finds the scientist dead and the plans stolen. *Black Coffee* is the only play by Christie in which her famous sleuth Poirot appears.

Her play *Ten Little Niggers* (1943), adapted from her 1939 novel of the same now-inflammatory title, played in the United States as *Ten Little Indians* and is now usually performed as *And Then There Were None*, the title under which the novel was published in the United States. The play also uses the device of isolation to increase suspense, with eight people called to an island off the coast of Devon. Each has at one time or another had a role in causing a death but all have escaped punishment. When they arrive on the island they are told that their hosts are away and their needs will be taken care of by two servants. One by one the guests turn up dead, each murdered in the manner described in the verses of a nursery rhyme.

With *Witness for the Prosecution* Christie altered her formula and set it in a courtroom. The play is based on her short story of the same name, but Christie changed significant elements of the plot in bringing it to the stage. In her short story, Christie allowed the young couple Leonard and Romaine Vole to subvert the criminal justice system and literally get away with murder. The stage version has a darker ending, with accused murderer Leonard acquitted by the jury thanks to Romaine's testimony. As he leaves the courtroom, however, Leonard introduces his wife to a young woman with whom he intends to run away. In his final act of betrayal, he warns Romaine that if she tells anyone of his guilt she will only incriminate herself, since he cannot be tried again. Romaine responds by grabbing the knife that had served as evidence in the trial and stabs Leonard in the back.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

While Christie's plays have been enormously popular with audiences, literary and drama critics often appear at a loss to explain their record-breaking popularity. Early reviewers, such as Harold Clurman, found the mystery-crime genre to be pedestrian, but they admitted that her plays were entertaining nonetheless. Subsequent critics have faulted their reliance on formulaic plots and settings, and have offered only grudging praise. For instance, some have observed that Christie's writing is more amenable to the dramatic genre than to the novel. Robert Graves, characterizing her use of language in her novels as "school-girlish" and her country-house settings "artificial," has posited that she will be remembered for her plays, which allow for greater audience engagement in the thrill of discovering a killer's identity. Arthur Nicholas Athanason has explained the phenomenal success of *The Mousetrap* by observing that the second half of the twentieth century—the period during which it played continuously—was a turbulent time for England, both socially and economically. In such circumstances Christie's play offered nostalgia for a safer, simpler time marked by a strictly defined social hierarchy. While *The Mousetrap* is Christie's most notable success, *Witness for the Prosecution* has also received accolades and is widely considered one of the great courtroom dramas of modern theater history.

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## PRINCIPAL WORKS

### Plays

*Black Coffee* 1930

\**Wasp's Nest* (teleplay) 1937

\**The Yellow Iris* (radio play) 1937

†*Ten Little Niggers* 1943; also performed as *Ten Little Indians* and *And Then There Were None*  
 †*Appointment with Death* 1945  
 ‡*Murder on the Nile* 1946  
*Three Blind Mice* (radio play) 1947  
*Butter in a Lordly Dish* (radio play) 1948  
 †*The Hollow* 1951  
 #*The Mousetrap* 1952  
 \**Witness for the Prosecution* 1953  
*Personal Call* (radio play) 1954  
*Spider's Web* 1954  
*A Daughter's a Daughter* 1956  
 †*Towards Zero* 1956  
*The Unexpected Guest* 1958  
*Verdict* 1958  
 ||*Go Back for Murder* 1960  
 §*Rule of Three* 1962  
 \*\**Fiddlers Five* 1971  
 ††*Akhmaton and Nefertiti* 1979  
 ‡‡*Chimneys* 2003

### Other Major Works

*The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (novel) 1920  
*The Secret Adversary* (novel) 1922  
*The Murder on the Links* (novel) 1923  
*The Man in the Brown Suit* (novel) 1924  
*Poirot Investigates* (short stories) 1924  
*The Road of Dreams* (poetry) 1925  
*The Secret of Chimneys* (novel) 1925  
 ##*The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (novel) 1926  
*The Big Four* (novel) 1927  
*The Mystery of the Blue Train* (novel) 1928  
*Partners in Crime* (short stories) 1929  
*The Seven Dials Mystery* (novel) 1929  
*Giant's Bread* [as Mary Westmacott] (novel) 1930  
 ##*The Murder at the Vicarage* (novel) 1930  
*The Mysterious Mr. Quin* (short stories) 1930  
*The Sittaford Mystery* (novel) 1931; also published as *The Murder at Hazelmoor*  
 ##*Peril at End House* (novel) 1932  
*The Thirteen Problems* (short stories) 1932; also published as *The Tuesday Club Murders*  
*The Hound of Death, and Other Stories* (short stories) 1933  
*Lord Edgware Dies* (novel) 1933; also published as *Thirteen at Dinner*  
*The Listerdale Mystery, and Other Stories* (short stories) 1934  
*Murder on the Orient Express* (novel) 1934; also published as *Murder on the Calais Coach*  
*Murder in Three Acts* (novel) 1934; also published as *Three Act Tragedy*  
*Parker Pyne Investigates* (short stories) 1934; also published as *Mr. Parker Pyne, Detective*  
*Unfinished Portrait* [as Westmacott] (novel) 1934  
*Why Didn't They Ask Evans?* (novel) 1934; also published as *The Boomerang Clue*  
*Death in the Air* (novel) 1935; also published as *Death in the Clouds*  
*The A.B.C. Murders* (novel) 1936  
 ##*Cards on the Table* (novel) 1936  
*Murder in Mesopotamia* (novel) 1936  
*Death on the Nile* (novel) 1937  
*Dumb Witness* (novel) 1937; also published as *Poirot Loses a Client*  
*Murder in the Mews, and Other Stories* (short stories) 1937; also published as *Dead Man's Mirror, and Other Stories*  
*Appointment with Death* (novel) 1938  
*Hercule Poirot's Christmas* (novel) 1938; also published as *Murder for Christmas*  
 ##*Murder Is Easy* (novel) 1939; also published as *Easy to Kill*  
*The Regatta Mystery, and Other Stories* (short stories) 1939  
*Ten Little Niggers* (novel) 1939; also published as *And Then There Were None*  
*One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* (novel) 1940; also published as *The Patriotic Murders*  
*Sad Cypress* (novel) 1940  
*Evil Under the Sun* (novel) 1941  
*N or M?* (novel) 1941  
*The Body in the Library* (novel) 1942  
*Five Little Pigs* (novel) 1942; also published as *Murder in Retrospect*  
*The Moving Finger* (novel) 1942  
*Absent in the Spring* [as Westmacott] (novel) 1944  
*Death Comes as the End* (novel) 1944  
*Towards Zero* (novel) 1944  
*Sparkling Cyanide* (novel) 1945; also published as *Remembered Death*  
*The Hollow* (novel) 1946  
*The Labours of Hercules* (short stories) 1947  
*The Rose and the Yew Tree* [as Westmacott] (novel) 1948  
*Taken at the Flood* (novel) 1948; also published as *There Is a Tide*  
*Witness for the Prosecution, and Other Stories* (short stories) 1948  
*Crooked House* (novel) 1949  
*The Mousetrap, and Other Stories* (short stories) 1949; also published as *Three Blind Mice, and Other Stories*  
*A Murder Is Announced* (novel) 1950  
*They Came to Baghdad* (novel) 1951  
 |||*A Daughter's a Daughter* [as Westmacott] (novel) 1952  
*Mrs. McGinty's Dead* (novel) 1952  
*Murder with Mirrors* (novel) 1952; also published as *They Do It with Mirrors*  
*After the Funeral* (novel) 1953; also published as *Funerals Are Fatal*  
*A Pocket Full of Rye* (novel) 1953  
*Destination Unknown* (novel) 1954; also published as *So Many Steps to Death*



*Hickory, Dickory, Dock* (novel) 1955; also published as *Hickory, Dickory, Death*  
*The Burden* [as Westmacott] (novel) 1956  
*Dead Man's Folly* (novel) 1956  
*4.50 from Puddington* (novel) 1957; also published as *What Mrs. McGillicuddy Saw!*  
*Ordeal by Innocence* (novel) 1958  
*Cat Among the Pigeons* (novel) 1959  
*The Adventures of the Christmas Pudding, and Selection of Entrées* (short stories) 1960  
*Double Sin, and Other Stories* (short stories) 1961  
*The Pale Horse* (novel) 1961  
*The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side* (novel) 1962; also published as *The Mirror Crack'd*  
*The Clocks* (novel) 1963  
*A Caribbean Mystery* (novel) 1964  
*At Bertram's Hotel* (novel) 1965  
*Third Girl* (novel) 1966  
*Endless Night* (novel) 1967  
*By the Pricking of My Thumbs* (novel) 1968  
*Hallowe'en Party* (novel) 1969  
*Passenger to Frankfurt* (novel) 1970  
*The Golden Ball, and Other Stories* (short stories) 1971  
*Nemesis* (novel) 1971  
*Elephants Can Remember* (novel) 1972  
*Poems* (poetry) 1973  
*Postern of Fate* (novel) 1973  
*Hercule Poirot's Early Cases* (short stories) 1974  
*Curtain* (novel) 1975  
*Sleeping Murder* (novel) 1976  
*An Autobiography* (autobiography) 1977  
*Miss Marple's Final Cases, and Two Other Stories* (short stories) 1979  
*The Harlequin Tea Set, and Other Stories* (short stories) 1997  
*While the Light Lasts, and Other Stories* (short stories) 1997

\*Christie adapted these works from her short stories by the same name.

†Christie adapted these works from her novels by the same name.

‡Christie adapted *Murder on the Nile* from her novel *Death on the Nile*.

#Christie adapted *The Mousetrap* from her radio play *Three Blind Mice*.

||Christie adapted *Go Back for Murder* from her novel *Five Little Pigs*.

§Comprises three one-act plays: *The Rats*, *Afternoon at the Seaside*, and *The Patient*.

\*\*This play was first performed as *Fiddlers Five* and then renamed *Fiddlers Three*, the title by which it is best known.

††*Akhnaton and Nefertiti*, staged in 1979, was written in 1937 and published in 1973, under the title *Akhnaton*.

‡‡Christie adapted *Chimneys* from her novel *The Secret of Chimneys*. The play was written in 1931 but not staged until 2003.

##These novels—as well as the short stories “*Philomel Cottage*” and “*Accident*”—have been adapted into plays by various authors.

|||Christie adapted *A Daughter's a Daughter* from her play by the same name, which was written in the late 1930s but not staged until after the novel was published.

## OVERVIEWS AND GENERAL STUDIES

### J. C. Trewin (essay date 1977)

SOURCE: Trewin, J. C. “A Midas Gift to the Theatre.” In *Agatha Christie: First Lady of Crime*, edited by H. R. F. Keating, pp. 133-54. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977.

[In the following essay, Trewin provides a retrospective overview of Christie's role in the theater.]

1

It is well over fifty years since ‘the world's greatest thriller’—so its management said—John Willard's *The Cat and the Canary*, reached London to the jingle of a distich:

If you like this play, please tell your friends;  
 But pray don't tell them how it ends.

To give away a puzzle is a darker crime than anything done on stage. That was why so many were furious when an evening-paper critic of *Towards Zero*, out of tune with Agatha Christie, revealed the murderer's name in his last paragraph, indeed the last three words. A rare lapse; no one has repeated it. (In any event, the piece survived for six months.) Through the years playgoers and critics joined in keeping any secret Mrs. Christie confided to them, and her trust was honoured; it astonishes us now that after a quarter of a century in London *The Mousetrap* can still be acted before audiences with no idea of its development or climax.

Agatha Christie, by herself, wrote twelve full-scale plays (one published, not performed) and three in a single act. She collaborated in another full-length play; four more, from her novels or short stories, were adapted by other hands. It was fitting, I think, that her final one-acter, *The Patient* (1962), depended on its curtain-line. Whatever else was wrong, nobody sustained a problem as she did, or solved it so quickly without a tedious explanatory huddle. This was her Midas gift to the theatre. ‘Upon my soul,’ exclaimed Dickens's Barnacle Junior, ‘you mustn't come into the place saying you want to know, you know.’ Agatha Christie's fans did want to know. In the later plays they may have found it a lagging wait. Never mind: having been in at the death they insisted on a post-mortem verdict.

By the time she had fully arrived, a dramatist on her own, what someone christened the Deep Freeze period had ended. These were plays, often American, in which a writer used unscrupulously any kind of effect that might chill. It might also be comic; he had to risk that. *The Cat and the Canary* began about midnight (ideal

for a will-reading) in an isolated house by the Hudson River, twenty years to the hour after the testator's death. The place, with adjustable panelling, was staffed by a West Indian Negress and a farcical housemaid—possibly in curl-papers; I am not sure. Characters included a Keeper of the Asylum. About the same season the cast of another play, an English one planked down surprisingly in deep Norfolk, contained a Modern Girl (the dramatist's capital letters), a Secret Service agent, an American Orientalist, an Indian butler, a Chinese servant, a handy man, and Kali, a Manchurian leopardess. Thrillers then could have grabbed a classic epigraph: 'Nothing is but what is not.' Everybody was either someone else or an irrelevant eccentric. John Gielgud, as a young actor, fought through a rattle-trap entitled *The Skull* (a detective as its criminal): it was established in a deserted church with a ghostly organist, and, as Gielgud said resignedly, a comic spinster in difficulties, an old professor with a cloak, and a cockney sexton with a club-foot, to help the thing along.

This was not Agatha Christie's way. Her characters could be waxwork, but there was never a leopardess in sight. Agreed, in *Spider's Web* she did admit a sliding panel. 'It would be very convenient for holding a dead body, wouldn't it?' said a schoolgirl, Pippa Hailsham-Brown (in the brisk voice of Margaret Barton); and certainly it was: one of the few concessions, quietly tongue-in-cheek, to a method that had faded while Agatha Christie was first writing. At its meridian, but not at hers, we could have counted upon a stage bitumen-black or steeped in a sickly green, a flapping of bats in the belfry, complex work with trap-doors, and quite likely a blackmailer sending to his victim 'quintets of cocoa-beans to call up memories of old days in Africa'.

2

Agatha Christie seems to have been in the theatre for generations. Yet she had only one produced play of her own—*Black Coffee*, no cocoa-beans—until the coming of *Ten Little Niggers* in 1943. She thought so little of her first piece, efficient and scarcely remembered now, that she dated it in an article as 'about 1927: I believe it came on for a short run in London, but I didn't see it because I was abroad in Mesopotamia'. A kindly word to her past; a lost drift of pollen. It was years before Ivor Brown would say of her, as Britain's most popular dramatist: 'Agatha Christie is incapable of seeing two or three living persons gathered together without imagining a third who has ceased to live. Lounge-hall immediately becomes mortuary.'

I was brought up to the drama in a town in south-west England. A fair touring date, there was also a small and vigorous Repertory. So we were able, at a long remove from London, to observe its fashions and contortions, its panelwork, scrawny hands and misty phosphores-

cence; multiple disguises and mad scientists in cellars; seldom a leopardess because these were awkward to travel, but plays called invitingly *The Gorilla* and *The Monster*; after these a sequence of corpses in the library. The later puzzles were predictable. They gave us a spurious sense of power. Either it was so obviously the parlourmaid that it couldn't be, and therefore was; or else X was an actor of so much standing that his last-act flourish was obligatory.

About this time Agatha Christie, who would never be predictable, appeared with *Black Coffee*, produced in 1930 at Swiss Cottage, and in 1931 at the St. Martin's (where *The Mousetrap*, brought from next door, would settle forty years on). Francis L. Sullivan as the Belgian Poirot, handling the Amory murder case, had Roland Culver as his Watson, Captain Hastings. Soon the play turned up at our Repertory in its precise and applauded sorting and docketing of clues. If the Poirot here was unrecognizable, that was hardly alarming; the stock-company actor had already supplied Hanaud in *At the Villa Rose* with the same fluff of mannerism and the same accent, standard fittings for a European detective.

*Black Coffee* was not Poirot's stage début; the effervescent fellow had arrived at the Prince of Wales Theatre (1928) in *Alibi*. Discreetly but firmly adapted by the veteran Michael Morton from *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, its solution startled any newcomer. I suppose most older London playgoers recall it for the presence of Charles Laughton. During his first few London seasons this young man, plump and protean, would come on as a Hungarian tramp, a Czarist general, a glossy American millionaire, Agatha Christie's detective ('entirely unlike him, but a wonderful actor,' she said generously), a half-paralysed Dublin footballer, a slightly sinister Mr. Pickwick, a red-haired sadist, a farcical brigadier, and an oleaginous gangster—'oily' is too simple. It could have been half the cast of a Deep Freeze play.

Laughton and Christie did not meet again on stage. During the 1930s she continued to let other dramatists speak for her in the theatre though we gather that she would have preferred the work herself. She did write, but left unprinted, a play so far from routine that she was probably diffident about it. The year was 1937, date of her novel, *Death on the Nile*, which was dramatized a decade later. A visit to Luxor, where she saw Howard Carter, had inspired the elaborate frieze of *Akhnaton*, not published until 1973 and as yet unperformed; it might have suited the crowded portrait-gallery of the 1930s, everyone welcome from Socrates to Jane Shore, Parnell, and Victoria Regina. In three acts, ten scenes, and an epilogue, a span of more than sixteen years, with nine changes of set and a cast of

twenty-two, supers aside, she yielded to an indulgence that has affected other dramatists. History suddenly grasps them. Thus Ben Travers, high master of English farce, wrote—he hoped anonymously—a searching portrait of Saint Paul, *Chastity My Brother*. It was undervalued because news of his authorship filtered out: a writer had to stay in his own 'field'. Eden Phillpotts left behind him an unperformed drama, *A Comedy Royal*, from 1067 in the city of Byzantium.

Agatha Christie went back 2,500 years beyond this in a dignified, bloodless pictorial tragedy, with ceremonial prose that never achieved eloquence. It dramatized the fate of King Akhnaton, his wife Nefertiti, and his attempt to supplant the old religion of Egypt and to overthrow the priesthood. Akhnaton himself ran a high temperature, but the people in general were as remote from us emotionally as they were in time. Mrs. Christie was eager to enliven them. A stage direction read: 'Down L. Akhnaton is putting the final touches of colour to the well-known sculptured head of Nefertiti.' In the less sombre moments Nefertiti's sister, Nezzemut, could talk like this: 'Being Queen of Egypt is quite wasted on you. I'd have done it so much better. The King is so dreamy and moody—he needs someone to wake him up—to—to run him!'

The play remained, presumably, on Agatha Christie's desk. In the theatre other dramatists had taken over. Frank Vosper, self-confident, often witty actor who was lost at sea, based *Love From a Stranger* (1936) on a Christie short story, 'Philomel Cottage', expanding it into an able Fat Boy drama ('I wants to make your flesh creep'). He cast himself as the homicidal colonial wooer of the girl who, dangerously, had won a sweep-stake. After a loitering start, the third act had visitors to the New Theatre fainting from anxiety, a throw-back to Grand Guignol. Next, the *Ghost Train* driver, Arnold Ridley, restored Poirot (Francis L. Sullivan once more) in a version of *Peril at End House*. Sound enough; but by then it was the spring of 1940 and real life had dimmed the Theatre Theatrical.

After these, with a couple of exceptions, Agatha Christie would walk alone. In *Ten Little Niggers* (1943, St. James's; directed by Ivor Brown's wife, Irene Hentschel), she disposed, one by one, of most of the guests and servants—we had a general, a judge, a doctor, a spinster, and so forth—isolated on Nigger Island off the South Devon coast. A wholesale murder puzzle, contrived with perfect sangfroid, its success dismayed the experts. C. B. Cochran, who ought to have known, told Mrs. Christie that, though he would have done it, his backers (clearly without historical sense) thought it impossible to have so many people dying on the stage: 'It would just make audiences roar with laughter.' It did not; and in time it proved to be one of the only two Christies to carry New York. There (421 performances) it was re-titled, tactfully, *Ten Little Indians*.

With its disembodied voice, progressive ornament-smashing, and strengthening tension, this was one of those plays that are magnetic in performance, though in a day or two we cannot quote a line. The rest of Agatha Christie's acted work followed it within nineteen years. The only other thriller-dramatist who wrote so resolutely was Edgar Wallace, and he packed his plays into a far briefer space. Reckless and impatient, he asked for large companies and expensive sets; tempted by Deep Freeze methods, he was not above organ-music and a hooded figure in a vault. Except in *Witness for the Prosecution*, which was privileged, Agatha Christie did keep her casts in hand; a management's model dramatist, she was invariably thoughtful. Peter Saunders, the impresario who staged eleven of her plays, counting the triple bill, records that a first script of *The Mousetrap*—two sets and a cast of ten—was rather too much for his resources at the Ambassadors Theatre. Next day Mrs. Christie returned with the script rewritten and one of the sets and two actors deleted.

Apart from certain scenes on the Nile, in Jerusalem, and in Petra, which derived from Middle East journeys with her archaeologist-husband, Agatha Christie kept as a rule to country houses where a plot could turn round. Hence the drawing-room at Copplestone Court in Kent, with priest's hole; the Great Hall of Monkswell Manor in Berkshire; Sir Claud Amory's house at Abbot's Cleeve; the Garden Room at Sir Henry Angkatell's; and sundry mansions in South Wales, near the Bristol Channel; Devon, and homicide-ridden Cornwall. A generic title would have been *Murder at a House Party*. She had an ear for titles. Oddly, 'Murder', which her audience needed, figured in only three. During her last years, when she was a guest at a writers' conference, another guest told his neighbour—a local dignitary's wife—that he had acted in *Murder in the Cathedral*. She nodded: 'Ah, yes, that would have been one of Agatha's.' (Not everyone knows that Eliot's title was the inspiration of Henzie Raeburn, actress-wife of the director, Martin Browne).

## 3

Agatha Christie put action before character. Too often, in early plays or late, her people were stereotyped. Like Wilde's minor epigrams, they could have been transferred, as needed, from plot to plot, hall to manor, court to vicarage: a doctor there, a spinster here. Attendants on a body, they rarely had life of their own. Naturally, we remember Poirot—even he could be something of a stereotype—and Mrs. Boynton in *Appointment with Death*, Romaine in *Witness for the Prosecution*, Clarissa in *Spider's Web*, and Lady Angkatell in *The Hollow* do linger. Others can coil out in a greyish procession of names. Who were Lady Melksham, Justin Fogg, Bryan Wingfield, Inspector Japp, Miss ffolliott-ffoulkes, Kay Strange, Michael Starkwedder, and Mr. Mayhew?

Uncertainty, I daresay, is ingratitude. Even if they might as well have answered to numbers, they did everything required of them; collectively, a disciplined shoal of red herrings. No addict has time or wish to complain during a performance; but after the event a Christie programme can be unhelpful. Who (if I may ask teasingly) were Giles Ralston and Amyas Crale?

The contrast between the characters and the things they did was soon visible. Few of the people in *Appointment with Death* (1945) kept any appointment with life. I recall the play for its Middle Eastern décor; for a cave in a rose-red cliff at Petra where the matriarchal Mrs. Boynton, created by Mary Clare, sat like an unpleasant idol as she drowsed and later died. Poisonous and poisoned, she had been a hypnotist and a wardress in an American gaol. Others round her were so dimly traced that we could hardly bother about them. Frank Vosper, with his actor's awareness, had seen his characters more acutely in *Love from a Stranger*. Led by Ivor Novello (as the homicidal maniac), Diana Wynyard, and Margaret Rutherford, this was the first play sent, with a portable theatre, to the Normandy invasion front.

It was 1951 before Agatha Christie moved permanently into the West End scene. During the previous six years she had had only two plays, one her own, one an adaptation. Her *Murder on the Nile* (1946), in spite of its background and a grand actress, Vivienne Bennett, never got going. True, an authoritative clergyman (synopsis speaking) would 'lay bare an audacious conspiracy' in the saloon of a Nile paddle steamer. Someone was shot in the knee; someone else was shot while lying in a bunk. Finally, it was apparent that a romance between 'a more than usually eligible young man and a downtrodden girl would soon ripen into matrimony'. Good; but I wish today that the bells rang louder. *Murder at the Vicarage* (1949), at the Playhouse—once, tautologically, the Playhouse Theatre—was Moie Charles and Barbara Toy's treatment of the novel. Resuscitated in 1975, it trailed into a second year, longer than the original run, on the talismanic strength of Agatha Christie's name above the title: enough to pull in audiences and to blast the critics. The piece was a skein of cross-questions and crooked answers in the vicarage study, as busy as a marketplace while the vicar, his wife, his nephew, his curate, his maid, his neighbours, all from stock, prowled round to confuse us in the matter of Colonel Protheroe's murder: a problem teased out by the most ardent gardener and knitter in St. Mary Mead.

Eighteen months after the *Vicarage*, Agatha Christie ruled her own stage. She would be helped again only once (in *Towards Zero*); and she was about to begin the central period on which, in the theatre, her fame depends. The summer of 1951 brought *The Hollow*, her

first play under Peter Saunders's sage management; in its early months it would restore the Fortune Theatre, a little house opposite the Drury Lane colonnade that had reminded Sean O'Casey of Falstaff's page looking across to his master. The theatre's name had often seemed ironic; but now puzzle-plays were scarce and audiences took gratefully to this one (from the Christie novel) about the death of an unloved doctor, a weekend guest at a house in the Home Counties.

Misguidedly perhaps, Agatha Christie delayed his murder until the beginning of the second act, though she held her solution as usual until the ebb of the third. Practically everyone wished to kill the man; *The Hollow* was like an armoury bristling with weapons. Earnestly we hoped that he would be shot; and once he was, the evening itself shot along cheerfully, Jeanne de Casalis, radio's 'Mrs. Feather', presiding as a vague creature called Lady Angkatell whose left and right hands were inevitably at odds. The dialogue was lively. The detective came credibly from Scotland Yard. Under Hubert Gregg, later a prolific Christie director, the piece ran at the Fortune, and later the Ambassadors, for 376 performances. A good score, it would soon look meagre. On 25 November 1952 Peter Saunders, who had leased the Ambassadors in West Street behind Charing Cross Road, a compact drawing-room house renowned for its wartime revues, put on a new thriller, *The Mousetrap*.

4

We need another word for this kind of play. 'Whodunnit' is clumsy, 'thriller' merely a mild label. 'Thrill' has lost the potency of its Elizabethan usage when Juliet cried, 'A faint cold fear thrills through my veins,' and Claudio trembled at 'the thrilling region of thick-ribbed ice'. Theatrically the word must be an everlasting umbrella for everything between the grinding mechanical alarms of *The Bat* (from the primeval Deep Freeze) and such a closely-manoeuvred puzzle as *The Mousetrap*. With this title, proposed by her son-in-law, Mrs. Christie added a laugh to contemporary Shakespeare. At *Hamlet*, iii.ii.232 (for let us be exact) the king asks tetchily after the wordier part of the play scene: 'Have you heard the argument? Is there no offence in't?'

HAMLET:

No, no, they do but jest, poison in jest. No offence i'th world.

KING:

What do you call the play?

HAMLET:

The Mouse-trap . . .

In any *Hamlet* revival now the company holds its breath. Someone will laugh responsively and irrelevantly. An audience is whisked out of Elsinore and