

Hercule Poirot vs. the Police: Detecting *The ABC Murders*

Mark Aldridge

In a book about contemporary police dramas, it may seem a little perverse to have written a chapter about Agatha Christie adaptations. For many, the works and adaptations of Agatha Christie may present the antithesis of the ways that both society and drama now approach the issue of policing. In recent decades writers of contemporary crime dramas have allowed (and even expected) audiences to be suspicious of the police, whether due to institutionalized corruption or the perennial “bad egg”. Thus, viewers of dramas from *Prime Suspect* (ITV, 1991-2006) to *Line of Duty* (BBC, 2012-21) understand that members of the police are to be suspected as much as any other characters. They are not granted any special status or trust simply because of their job.

To some, this may then seem at odds with policing and detection in the world of Agatha Christie. In his aptly-named article “‘Tea and scandal at four- thirty’: Fantasies of Englishness and Agatha Christie’s Fiction of the 1930s and 1940s” Christopher Yiannitsaros highlights Alison Light’s summary of how Agatha Christie is perceived, and that “there exists, despite the chronological scope of Christie’s oeuvre, an imaginative homogenizing of her detective fictions into a ‘timeless mulch’ representative of early–mid twentieth century England” (Yiannitsaros 2017, p.79). This homogenization speaks to general expectations of characters as well as period – perhaps one overworked police detective is much like another. Conversely, star detectives Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple are not part of the established form of law and order as they generally work under their own rules, for either private clients or their own satisfaction. Yiannitsaros goes on to quote from Light when saying “To those familiar with her reputation, rather than the novels themselves, therefore, Christie appears very much ‘fixed in a mythic time, a “golden age” . . . familiarly evoked as ‘that unforgettable never- never land of chintz and country houses’” (Yiannitsaros 2017, p.79). In her 1991 chapter on Agatha Christie, Light had warned about the difficulties of merging the pleasant glow of period drama with the criminality at the heart of Christie’s novels, stating that viewers of the BBC’s *Miss Marple* adaptations (1984-92) “could be forgiven for believing Agatha Christie to be the high priestess of nostalgia rather than the ‘Queen of Crime’” (Light 1991, p.62).

Certainly this seemed to be the case three decades ago, and for some time afterwards. It was only at the turn of the twenty-first century that the producers of the long running *Agatha Christie’s Poirot* series (1989-2013) decided to jettison the comfort blanket of its supporting cast (secretary Miss Lemon, friend Captain Hastings, and Chief Inspector Japp of Scotland Yard) as its

emphasis shifted to the dark underbelly of crime rather than the almost jolly game of piecing together a puzzle. The tone became more serious, and the ramifications of murder more clear. This was a stark change for the series, but perhaps a necessary one for it to compete on a commercial level alongside home broadcaster ITV's rather more bloodthirsty tales of murder seen elsewhere (traditional Christie fans may fairly argue that it was precisely this contrast that so appealed in the first place). The process of adaptation often comes with a lot of baggage, and perhaps even more than usual with Agatha Christie. A new television series of her works will conjure up images of the aforementioned "cosy nostalgia", which also must compete with previous adaptations. In the case of the BBC's 2018 adaptation of Christie's 1936 novel *The ABC Murders* there were even more objects of audience familiarity and perhaps expectation, from the depiction of Belgian private detective Hercule Poirot (and all the actors who had played him before) to the reputation of dramatist Sarah Phelps. Phelps had previously adapted Christie's *And Then There Were None* (2015), *The Witness for the Prosecution* (2016) and *Ordeal by Innocence* (2018), and had reveled in the darkness of these tales, pushing these elements to the forefront of her scripts.

This chapter will consider the ways in which Phelps' 2018 adaptation of *The ABC Murders*, directed by Alex Gabassi and starring John Malkovich as Hercule Poirot, reconfigures Christie's original story so that this retelling can properly exist alongside contemporary crime dramas, perhaps to a greater extent than it sits within any canon of Christie adaptations. It strives to be both an adaptation of the source material as well as an addition to contemporary police and crime dramas. In order to do this, the production molds Christie's original into a new shape that feels unfamiliar to those expecting a more traditional heritage-style period production, because this new version of the story is designed to be viewed alongside other contemporary policing dramas. This chapter will look at Christie's original novel and then consider how it has been reworked to be of contemporary importance. In doing so I explore how both the original story and the adaptation consider questions of changing society and the role of the police in particular. As we will see, the adaptation's choices reinforce the fact that Phelps' adaptations have foregrounded characters rather than the puzzle mysteries from Christie's original novels. "I don't care about 'whodunnit'," Phelps said in a later interview, "and I don't think that's the point - it's the 'why' for me. What would push you to do that thing? I would really like to think about the whole idea that these murders are terrible, terrible events. Lives have been annihilated by violence. That's the thing that I have always found fascinating." (BBC Writers Room, 2018).

This emphasis on characters' lives and changing society is a crucial part of Phelps' approach, and the fact that a contemporary screenwriter should wish to emphasize society is no surprise. As Ruth McElroy has pointed out, "Crime drama is a genre especially responsive to changing socio-

cultural conditions, meaning that it is able to exploit television's close relationship to the present, everyday world" (McElroy 2016, p.15). For *The ABC Murders*, the question of how "present" and "everyday" we can consider it to be is more complex than normal, as the adaptation situates events in 1933. However, this period setting does not make it detached from the reality of 2018, as Phelps wished to explicitly link what had happened in the past to the contemporary world as she saw it, as she reframed Christie's story through the lens of modern-day Britain.

Agatha Christie, Society and the Police in *The ABC Murders*

Although Agatha Christie did not offer an immovable overarching perspective on either society generally, nor the nature of truth and justice, it is worth considering the broad nature of the role of policing in some of her novels, and particularly in her original 1936 novel *The ABC Murders*. Many of her mysteries use the police to carry out the less exciting aspects of enforcing justice, most particularly ensuring that the investigation reaches a position that will lead to that pesky but necessary conclusion of many cases: the trial. Not that all culprits need such a traditional conclusion to their crimes, as some are punished in an extra-legal sense (perhaps through suicide, revenge, or even some divine intervention). For Christie, police officers often performed a necessary function but offered little more to the story – they were rarely important to the crime, and by her own admission their characterizations were often sketched out so lightly that they became almost interchangeable. For adaptations, they were often made more interesting, particularly in their weary attitudes towards being beaten by talented amateurs or private detectives, as with Philip Jackson's Chief Inspector Japp, who accompanied David Suchet's Poirot in the ITV series, or David Horovitch's Inspector Slack, often beaten to the punch by Joan Hickson's Miss Marple. There are exceptions of course, most notably in one of Christie's most famous stories and a Hercule Poirot novel, where the story's "detective" (whether apparent or real) is actually the culprit. Such a twist is a strong warning to readers not to take anything for granted.

It is common for characters in Agatha Christie novels to think little of the police, and certainly expect that they can be outwitted. Sometimes this can be attributed to simple criminal arrogance, or a feeling that some may be above the law, especially those in high society. Gill Plain has highlighted an example in the superficially traditional country house mystery *The Hollow* (1946). She draws attention to the actions of Lucy, aka Lady Angkatell, after there has been a murder in apparently plain sight by the titular house's swimming pool. "If she did shoot John, she's probably dreadfully sorry about it now," says Lucy, "Sometimes I don't think you policemen think of these things." Plain points out that this passage demonstrates Lucy's "distance from conventional attitudes

towards the law,” and that *The Hollow* depends for its plot “on convoluted strategies of misdirection undertaken in an attempt to confound a police investigation,” by “bringing chaos to order and due process through the staging of events.” (Plain 2020, p.184) The casualness with which *The Hollow* considers that the police can be easily thrown off the scent because they simply wouldn’t understand why the crime had to be committed or covered up is not unique, and similar principles appear elsewhere. Most particularly stories such as *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) and *And Then There Were None* (1939) are explicitly motivated by characters who feel that the traditional system of justice has failed either them or society at large. The general sense seems to be that guilt and innocence is about more than simply whether the police will bring lawbreakers to justice. As J.C. Bernthal points out, Christie’s response to questions of guilt and innocence is complicated. *Murder on the Orient Express* has a victim who is “a child-murderer whose money makes him essentially above the law and the 12 assassins his self-appointed jury and executioners: the detective, Hercule Poirot, decides not to turn them over to the police.” (Bernthal 2019, p.32)

Perhaps it is no coincidence that these extra-judicial cases tend to be darker in nature than those handled more traditionally by the police alongside Christie’s detectives, as they remove society’s safety net of the criminal justice system that can reassure the public that lawbreakers will be suitably punished. This is particularly apparent in the David Suchet version of *Murder on the Orient Express* (2010), which was filmed during the “darker” later era of the series. In this adaptation Poirot’s turmoil and guilt in light of his Catholic faith is apparent. At the end, when he does not inform the police of the truth of the crime, he is seen clutching a rosary as he walks away from the train. Poirot’s faith is a recurring but understated element of the character on the page, but as we will see Phelps also decided to make his Catholicism significant. When discussing another case that is not investigated by the authorities in the traditional manner, Blake Allmendinger points out: “Like noir, *And Then There Were None* reflects a pessimistic view of human nature,” (2019, p.62) and the same may be said of *The ABC Murders*, which features a particularly ruthless premise. In this novel, Hercule Poirot receives letters signed by “ABC”, which inform the detective of apparently random killings. The only apparent link between the murders are the victims’ initials – first Alice Ascher in Andover, then Betty Barnard in Bexhill, and so on. It is significant that the perpetrator approaches Poirot directly, and the reader may wonder why (all is eventually revealed, of course). But in terms of the role of policing, it provides an interesting example of the investigation being deliberately short-circuited to exclude the traditional police force, initially at least. Japp is consulted by Poirot but believes the first letter to be a hoax, and in doing so removes the police from undertaking any intervention in the early stages of the case. However, when there really is a murder in Andover, Scotland Yard moves into action, with “a conference of powers” taking place to investigate the crime

and, it is hoped, prevent further murders. One of those joining Japp for this is Inspector Crome, described by Poirot's friend (and the book's narrator) Captain Hastings as a "much younger man, he was the silent, superior type. Well educated and well read, he was, for my taste, several shades too pleased with himself ... He was obviously a suitable person to undertake the present case, but I thought that he was just a little too aware of the fact himself. His manner to Poirot was a shade patronising" (Christie 1936, p.66). The police detectives are frustrated by the murderer choosing to cut them out of the equation and continue a simple one-way correspondence with Poirot only, as this elevates his importance, and subsequently reduces theirs. We will see that this tension is emphasized by Phelps in her adaptation.

Of course, Poirot can never quite be the apex of British law and order because of his foreignness as a Belgian refugee, and now retired from his own national police force. R.A. York has pointed out that there is more to Poirot's status than a simple one-way condescension shown to him by many characters (including Japp and even Hastings). "Poirot himself is shown to exploit his foreignness," York points out, "counting on the fact that English people will say things more readily to a foreigner they do not wholly respect than to an English policeman" (2007, p.69). This is especially significant when one considers Poirot's own arrogance, and in *The ABC Murders* the killer's letters to him exploit this by taunting him. This is an important part of the murderer's game – he wants the pattern of murders to be noticed and investigated as mindless, random acts when in fact their randomness is by design. For within this collection of murders is the one killing that has a true motivation – one that would be obvious if considered in isolation, but more readily dismissed if seen as part of a random attack. Therefore, it is important for the criminal that the acts are investigated, but only in a way that will allow the true motivation to go unnoticed. Crucial to this plan is that one letter should go astray in order to delay any investigation into the most important third murder, and for this the killer needed a private address – any letter sent to Scotland Yard would find its way promptly however addressed. Resultantly, it is Poirot's status as a private citizen that is important.

York argues that this direct involvement of Poirot by the ABC killer "makes the relationship of murderer and detective very much a duel, and that is what Poirot enjoys: in a similar spirit he congratulates Henrietta in *The Hollow* as an outstanding opponent ... it is a matter of skill and success, not of rightness. Poirot's frequent assertions that he disapproves of murder are a strangely faint attempt to revert to morality" (2007, pp.88-9). In fact, Poirot sometimes seems to be enjoying the investigation as a game of cat and mouse rather than a serious attempt to capture criminality. But then, as York also says, Christie's detectives are somewhat incongruous anyway: "the eccentric foreigner, the unmarried elderly woman with her apparently limited perspective and her decorous manner – are enough to show that these stories are fabrications and contain much that is arbitrary;

the point is implicit in the whole conventionality of the genre, with its set functions of detective, Watson, police rival, victim, suspects, and its standard progression towards a scene of systematic explanation” (2007, p.164). The role of the police is an important part of this puzzle – the likes of Poirot enable the wheels of justice to grind in the right direction, but they establish themselves as complementary to police work, generally not in opposition to it. However, for Sarah Phelps’ adaptation of *The ABC Murders*, the relationship between Poirot and the police is anything but straightforward.

Recontextualizing *The ABC Murders* in 2018

The relative fame of both Christie’s original works and prior Poirot screen adaptations meant that the 2018 adaptation of *The ABC Murders* arrived with these contexts in mind, but perhaps just as important was the determination of both Phelps and the BBC to ensure that this was a telling of the story with a modern twist. In this version of *The ABC Murders* the 1930s are not seen as an ornate and beautiful time of modernism and gentility. The earlier ITV *Agatha Christie’s Poirot* series reveled in its detachment from modern-day ordinariness, especially with its *mise-en-scène*, as Ruth McElroy has pointed out in her discussion of Jonathan Bignell’s identification of its significance. As she writes, “The rich, ornate *mise en scène* of Poirot’s art deco interiors, for example, contrast sharply with the functional ordinariness of *Scott and Bailey*’s [2011-16] police station.” (McElroy 2016, p.12) For *The ABC Murders* it is a dark period, with a rift in society caused by the rise of the British Union of Fascists (the badge of which is seen in such normally innocuous locations as on a ticket collector’s uniform), and the resulting hostility to immigrants including Poirot. Our Belgian detective is also ridiculed and cast aside by the police force, whose suspicions regarding his true identity and motivation permeate throughout the adaptation. The result is that this production needs to be considered alongside contemporary police and crime dramas, and not as a simple period piece. For several commentators this was a welcome departure from the norm. Lucy Mangan in *The Guardian* recalled how she did not care for the adaptations starring David Suchet, claiming that they included “The determined retention of the worst aspect of Christie – the constant feeling of cipher-characters being moved into place by an all-knowing hand, like chess pieces with Marcel waves and costume jewellery” (Mangan 2018). Mangan then acknowledged that “My husband, by way of relations-severing contrast, loves it for precisely this” (Mangan 2018). Any deviation from the somewhat homogenized film adaptations that followed on from 1974’s *Murder on the Orient Express* film may come as a shock to some, but this would be the fault of television’s desire for more of the same rather than a revolutionary approach to adaptation. As Alison Light points out, “An Agatha Christie television bonanza in the 1980s set the final seal upon this image” (1991, p.62) of Christie’s works

taking place in mythic and attractive times. “Whether it was the roaring twenties, the genteel thirties or the village settings of the 1950s, the name of Christie became synonymous with lavish and painstaking reconstructions of ‘period’” (Light 1991, p.62). In part we may see 2018’s *The ABC Murders* as a reaction against this – an attempt to reclassify it away from such traditional approaches. Certainly, there is no nostalgia in this version of the story; in fact, it feels almost anti-nostalgia, as if it is a warning that one shouldn’t believe the cosier adaptations’ representations of the past and society.

Phelps’ version of *The ABC Murders* is speaking not only of British society of the 1930s, but to British society of 2018. Charlotte Brunsdon has written that while we should caution against “too simple a correspondence between crime and unrest on the streets, and crime on television,” there is nevertheless some sort of link between unrest and societal changes in the “real world” and the depiction of policing on television, at least in part through “the acknowledged use of news stories as plot stimulants, and the reporting and re-enactment of news stories using fictional generic conventions” (Brunsdon 1998, p.224). We may extend this to reach the somewhat obvious conclusion that a television production that is set in the past and adapts a historical text will often be reflecting society at the time of its production, rather than the society of the source material. Phelps said of Christie’s writing that, in her opinion, “What she is really writing about is power and how people lie to hold on to their power. It’s not so much the murder, it’s the lying. It’s not what weapon was used, it’s why is that person dead. That’s what I pursue” (Kanter 2020). These are universal themes, and their location in a particular historical period for this story is almost irrelevant to their potency for a modern audience, especially in light of high-profile dialogue in Britain regarding the country’s withdrawal from the European Union and an attitude towards refugees that has been perceived by many as hostile. It would not be difficult for much of the audience to be able to draw comparisons between Britain of 2018 and the eerily similar issues at play in the run up to the Second World War, as depicted in Phelps’ *The ABC Murders*, which emphasizes the reality of Britain at the time above that shown in Christie’s original text. Such a comparison did not go unnoticed. In his article about racism and xenophobia in the works of Agatha Christie, Shane Brown particularly highlights the reception to this adaptation. He states that there was a backlash against the production from some quarters, with complaints that the production “was far removed from the book and that [Phelps’] decision to portray Poirot as the target of xenophobic insults at the time of the rise of the British Union of Fascists in the early 1930s was simply an excuse to try to draw parallels with Britain in 2018—most notably the current increase in anti- immigration sentiment following the rise of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and the vote to leave the European Union (or ‘Brexit’)” (Brown 2020, p.70).

Such parallels were entirely intentional, as Phelps made clear: “I chose 1933 really specifically because we are in a period in Britain where the British Union of Fascists (BUF) had started to gain a lot of traction,” she said, “especially within other mainstream political parties who sensed this groundswell and began to adopt some of the language for themselves” (BBC Writers Room, 2018). Such comparisons with contemporary Conservative-run Britain were not welcomed in the right-wing press. Brown highlights some examples, including *The Sun* (a Rupert Murdoch owned tabloid), which wrote that it was a “Brexit-bashing drama” (McPheee, 2018). However, Brown argues that “what seems to have been missed by many of Phelps’s critics (including both Christie fans and Brexiteer reviewers) is that the original novel does portray the kind of antforeigner sentiment experienced by Poirot in the latest TV version and that it can be found in the words of an assortment of characters from the murderer to the police inspector” (2020, pp.70-71). Such casual xenophobia was often played for humor in earlier Poirot adaptations, such as in the second season’s “The Veiled Lady”, in which Poirot goes undercover as a Swiss locksmith. He arouses the housekeeper’s suspicions, especially when “pretending to talk in that silly accent” (actually Poirot’s own) alongside his alleged “shifty little eyes”. This results in a police arrest, much to the amusement of Inspector Japp. Such humor benefited from the implicit understanding with the audience that Poirot would always come out on top. This included amusement regarding the character’s styling practices, or occasionally unusual use of English, or his fussiness and precision shown at odds with the working class brusqueness of the British police. But in Phelps’ script this xenophobic differentiation is no longer a source of light humor. Instead, it is the focal point for a much darker glimpse of British society.

Society and the Police in Sarah Phelps’ *The ABC Murders*

It does not take long for the 2018 *The ABC Murders* to show that Poirot is now in a world that is quite unlike that faced by David Suchet’s version of the character. Early in the first episode we meet Chief Inspector Japp, Poirot’s biggest ally in British society, who then dies suddenly. The loss of his friend means that Poirot also loses his foothold on the ladder of British society, and he is left alone, as unlike the novel he is not accompanied by his friend Captain Hastings. Explaining this decision, Phelps stated that “The point of Hastings in the book is to explain Poirot to us but I don’t want someone else there, I want Poirot alone. I want him vulnerable and ageing because then you see the measure of the man” (BBC Writers Room, 2018). The result is an isolated Poirot, already reduced to performing at murder mystery parties, and now not taken at all seriously by the police. Poirot is initially ignored by Inspector Crome, Japp’s replacement, and then mocked. However, this is not just due to simmering xenophobia, but a more deep-rooted suspicion. Phelps chooses to rework Poirot’s

back story, and towards the end of the first episode (of three), Crome says that Poirot lied to Japp for years, and that he was not a detective as claimed. “Questions were asked about you, high up in the food chain,” Crome states, “People don’t like it when the force are made to look like halfwits by a foreigner. It’s out of step with the public mood, so questions were asked.” This “public mood” is therefore important to Poirot’s status and existence in his adopted country. It is not until the end of the serial that Phelps reveals her own take on Poirot’s history, as she redraws him as a former priest.

In an interview with the BBC Writers Room, Sarah Phelps explained which aspects of society she wished to emphasize and explore in her adaptation. She described 1930s Britain as “a period of savage recession and a lot of people were looking for someone to blame” (BBC Writers Room, 2018). For Phelps, it was important to show that the rise of fascism was not made of some stereotypical group of villains, but that it was insidious to society, with allyship to the cause manifesting itself in people who would otherwise seem valued members of the community. For example, Poirot’s neighbor, described by Phelps as “this lovely posh woman dressed in her furs with a little BUF pin tucked into her mink” attends the BUF rallies. “There is a sense that the BUF crosses class divides and unites its followers with hate and the hate of the stranger,” (BBC Writers Room, 2018) Phelps clarified, and elsewhere she explained how she intended to link this period to the present day. “It makes your skin crawl, because the language of that era is exactly the same as that of Brexit and Trump: stem the alien tide, build the wall,” she told *The i* newspaper. “I wanted to look at how that came about and what it might mean ... The British Union of Fascists is on the rise and there’s recession and unrest looming in Europe, and in the same time that it’s taken us today to get from the Olympics to Brexit – six years – there’s going to be another war. A lot of damage can be done in six years, and I wanted people to understand that” (Hughes 2018). This point feels like a natural extension of Charlotte Brunsdon’s 1998 essay “Structure of anxiety: recent British television crime fiction”, in which she drew parallels between the governance of the country and the depiction of crime on television, in particular the “strong law and order” rhetoric of the Conservative government of the 1980s and early 1990s. As McElroy states, “Brunsdon’s analysis is avowedly national and historical in focus, demonstrating how important it is to consider the specific contexts from which individual crime series emerge” (McElroy 2016, p.9). In the case of *The ABC Murders* there are two historical contexts of importance – Christie’s original text, and Phelps’ reworking.

These contexts are acknowledged when this adaptation allows characters to openly (and intertextually) mock the expectations that audiences may have of Agatha Christie’s work – “No corpse in the library?” asks Crome when his subordinate fails to substantiate Poirot’s expectations of a murder. This exchange is not Phelps making fun of Christie’s alleged tropes, but rather those who might believe that they know what sort of books she wrote, even if they don’t really. “In *The ABC*

Murders, [Christie] is very, very aware that there is something really unpleasant going on in England in the 1930s,” Phelps stated. “She actively references the talk about foreigners and the hostility. She doesn’t make that her leading thing, she’s just absorbing it and always saying ‘Are you paying attention? I am writing about this, are you paying attention?’” (Mellor 2020). Certainly in Phelps’ vision of the story the knowledge that such a rise of fascism was also a prelude to war means that the fracturing of society is a more important piece of the story, hence its greater emphasis.

This fracturing means that the role of the police in relation to society is a complicated one, ruled by individuals and power struggles as much as by any coherent policy decisions. McElroy highlights the significance of the 1978 report by Stuart Hall et al that showed how fears of increased violence “characterised a crisis of late capitalism in which the police force came, ideologically, to appear as the guardians of social order at a time of social fragmentation. Behind the powerful imagery of ‘violent hoodlums’ (the precursors, perhaps, of today’s hoodie), lay complex social, economic and political conflicts in post-industrial and post-imperial British society” (McElroy 2016, p.4). When applying this to a television drama context, it certainly appears that depictions of crime and policing make great use of whatever contemporary anxieties are at the fore. For *The ABC Murders* this includes not only twenty-first century concerns about criminality, but the conduct of police officers themselves. Much of the reporting of police misconduct has followed in the wake of the 1999 MacPherson Report (itself following the murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence), which found London’s Metropolitan Police to be institutionally racist. Police misconduct is explicitly shown in Phelps’ version of the story, as we witness the difference between Poirot’s restraint and the force’s brutishness; at one point in the first episode Poirot even tries to intervene to stop the police abusing an innocent suspect. Inevitably such interventions are not welcomed given that Poirot is seen as not only suspicious and untrustworthy, but also a figure of fun. After the police laugh at Poirot’s dyed beard, they then go on to treat him like a suspect in the case, rifling through his private papers, and telling him that “Nothing’s private any more”. Certainly, Poirot the refugee is accorded no respect and is seen as inferior and untrustworthy. As Lucy Mangan pointed out in her review, “It is a neat, credible and timely demonstration of how an immigrant friend (‘19 years I have lived here,’ he says at one point) can be reconceived as an enemy” (Mangan 2018).

Within the canon of crime and detection series this point makes for an interesting and deliberately difficult relationship. When discussing the new crop of police dramas in the 1980s and 1990s, Brunsdon asked “Whodunnit indeed, and who can be trusted to find out? We can usefully approach this investigation though two questions ‘who can police?’ and ‘who is accountable?’” (Brunsdon 1998, p.228). While it’s not unusual for there to be an uneasy relationship between the police force and the ‘star detective’ of crime fiction and drama, Phelps’ *The ABC Murders* pushes this

further into complete distrust and antagonism, and even hatred. Here we see that Poirot is the one who can investigate the best, but that it is Crome and his force who have the role of policing and who are certainly accountable for the results. This accountability leads to the desperation that results in strained co-operation between Poirot and the police force. “People don’t like their police being made to look like fools,” said Crome, and this dedication to the appearance of law and order being upheld (whatever the truth behind it) is significant to his characterization and motivation. When asked to describe the series in one word, Phelps opted for “Insidious ... Or actually, the word is outsider. They’re all outsiders, all of them. Sex, money, love, disease, grief; they’re all exiles from peace” (BBC Writers Room, 2018).

The final thoughts about this adaptation’s reconfiguring of the relationship between Christie’s original story and the modern-day drama serial should be reserved for the mystery’s star – Hercule Poirot himself. Phelps opted to characterize Poirot in a way that perhaps made him more human and vulnerable, and less a crime solving machine, and in doing so he is perhaps the best example of how this whole adaptation maneuvers elements of the original in a way that retains their essence but changes the emphasis. For Phelps, Poirot’s characterization was one she struggled to believe. “I thought if I’m going to do this then the biggest mystery in the book is not only unmasking and finding the killer but it’s with Hercule Poirot,” (BBC Writers Room, 2018) Phelps said:

I treated Hercule Poirot in the same way that I treated the characters in *Ordeal By Innocence* or in *The Witness for the Prosecution* or in *And Then There Were None*, which is simply to ask who are they? What do they want? What wakes them up at night? What is the pure flame of their life? What would they do to keep that burning? What would they do if their secrets were known? It’s exactly the same questions that you would ask of any character and I asked them of him. (BBC Writers Room, 2018).

In an interview with *America*, Phelps went further: “Some people got mad at me,” she said. “They said, ‘He was the head of the Belgian police!’ and I said, ‘Yes, well, the thing is... he’s a refugee. And refugees are civilians. In an invasion by a foreign power, the police aren’t going to have civilian status. I think he’s been lying.’” (Anderson 2019). Phelps then turned to Poirot’s attire and considered a new backstory for him: “I think that brimmed hat is a saturno. And that gray overcoat is his soutane. I think that watch chain is a rosary. And that hard collar that he habitually wears - turn it around. What is it?” (Anderson 2019). Combined with his Catholic faith, and a penchant for referring to himself as “Papa Poirot” and others as “mes enfants”, and the image of a priest emerged. In some ways, his life before we first meet him as a retiree in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920) is little

changed whether he was a priest or detective (he even refers to himself as simply a “policeman” in this adaptation, perhaps a deliberately broad characterization). The significance is that he was in a position of trust within society, in a role that people turned to in times of need. Phelps was interested only in the Poirot of *The ABC Murders*; she was open about the fact that she had not read any of the other novels featuring the character. Therefore, this is a sideways look into the world as constructed in this particular story, written at that particular time, revisited at a particularly turbulent point of modern British history. The reimagined backstory went beyond Poirot’s occupation, as it was also revealed that as a priest he had witnessed the pillaging of Belgium by German forces in the First World War, and most chillingly the burning of his church with the congregation still inside, while he was spared. For both Phelps and Malkovich this motivation was key to the Poirot as they imagined him. Phelps referred to the “anguishing little aspect of Poirot not having been enough to save his flock, and not being able to forgive himself, and being compelled to seek justice. It is a deep, deep dive into what it meant to be Hercule Poirot, a refugee who made his home in England, who was celebrated and famous but who I imagined as having been the most humble of men” (Anderson 2019, p.48). This version of *The ABC Murders* may have upset some die-hard fans of the original novel, but its intention was always clear. Although any adaptation of an Agatha Christie mystery will have many expectations thrust upon it, it is not the case that those making it need to accept them. Instead, *The ABC Murders* is clearly modelled on contemporary dramas that have something to say about modern-day society.

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