

A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a white, sleeveless, gathered-waist dress and a necklace, lies on her back on a mossy forest floor. She is looking towards the camera with a neutral expression. The background is a dense forest with moss-covered rocks and trees.

LISA HOPKINS

**Shakespearean
Allusion in
Crime Fiction**

DCI Shakespeare

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Michael Dobson
The Shakespeare Institute
University of Birmingham
Stratford-upon-Avon, United Kingdom

Dympna Callaghan
Syracuse University
Syracuse, New York USA

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Lisa Hopkins

Shakespearean
Allusion in Crime
Fiction

DCI Shakespeare

palgrave
macmillan

Lisa Hopkins
Faculty of Development and Society
Sheffield Hallam University
Sheffield
United Kingdom

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Introduction

In Ngaio Marsh's *Death in a White Tie*, Marsh's hero Alleyn tells his friend Lord Robert Gospel to observe a suspect 'with the very comment of your soul—' and Lord Robert interrupts with 'Yes, yes, yes. Don't quote now, Roderick, or somebody may think you're a detective' (28). In a much later Alleyn novel, *Tied up in Tinsel*, Alleyn responds to his wife's attempt to tell him something with, '*Speak, I am bound to hear*', and she says, 'Rory! Don't be a detective' (514). Both quotations are of course from *Hamlet*, and Shakespeare is a pervasive presence in detective fiction. Sometimes he is merely touched on, or suggested by a detail; in John Bingham's *My Name is Michael Sibley*, for instance, the narrator notes that 'when evening came I wandered across to the Falstaff and had a couple of large whiskies' (222). Sometimes Shakespeare is called in evidence as a guide to human nature, as in John Bude's *The Sussex Downs Murder* where the detective, trying to decide on the degree of Janet Rother's guilt, thinks, 'Now what the devil was that bit from Shakespeare? About the apple. Ah—"a goodly apple rotten at the core". Well, Janet Rother might quite easily be rotten at the core' (155). The importance of Shakespearean allusion as a background element is neatly illustrated by Runa Fairleigh's highly self-conscious *An Old-Fashioned Mystery*, which itself purports to be based on a manuscript of mysterious provenance and features just about every possible cliché of the genre, including a character whose main contribution to conversations is 'I say!', a girl who doesn't know whether she has committed crimes or not, purloined letters, a locked room mystery and a whole host of secret passages, and ten people on an

island who are killed one by one with no obvious perpetrator. Since no one has succeeded in solving the numerous murders, *An Old-Fashioned Mystery* concludes in an afterlife into which the characters are issued by Ronald Knox, a writer who famously deplored supernatural elements in crime fiction; a list of his ‘Ten Commandments of Detection’ given in a footnote (217) makes clear that every possible one of them has been broken. Officially the text makes no acknowledgement of Shakespeare beyond the bare fact of containing twins named Sebastian and Violet, but its opening epigraph is from *King Lear* (9), and at the end of the book the narrator pityingly tells the characters that this in itself really should have been enough to alert them to the fact that they were inhabiting a crime narrative (237).

Often, mention of Shakespeare is more sustained and substantial than this. R. S. White suggests that

when we look at cinematic crime thrillers, detective stories and *films noirs* in general, we can see the recurrence of at least some generic features drawn from *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* especially. The first provides the basis of a murderer’s guilt, a prevailing atmosphere of menace, and the most famous *femme fatale* in literary history – adding up to the ingredients for film noir; *Hamlet* provides the prototype for an investigative detective on the tracks of a murderer and becoming implicated himself, and also thread in ‘thrillers’ based on personal revenge for the death of a family member (wife in *The Big Heat*), a close colleague (*The Maltese Falcon*), or even a father-figure, if not always one so ghostly as Hamlet’s. (White, 6)

A number of writers and detective series show a sustained pattern of Shakespearean allusion, which may come from a wide range of plays. In the 1973 film *Theatre of Blood* a failed Shakespearean actor murders his critics using methods borrowed from plays including *Julius Caesar* (mass stabbing), *Troilus and Cressida* (being dragged by a horse), *Cymbeline* (beheading), *The Merchant of Venice* (cutting of a pound of flesh), *Richard III* (drowning in wine), *Othello* (pillow), *Henry VI, Part One* (burning at the stake), *Titus Andronicus* (eating of one’s ‘babies’, which are in this case dogs) and finally *King Lear*, as Diana Rigg’s dutiful daughter dies in her father’s arms after justice finally catches up with him; the glittering cast includes Renée Asherson, who played Katherine in the Olivier *Henry V*, and there is some obvious parody of Olivier’s style and mannerisms. *Theatre of Blood* is a particularly entertaining and self-conscious example of the genre, but it is by no means unique: a similar effect can be seen in a wide variety of writers. In this book, I explore some of the ways in which Shakespeare can feature in detective fiction and what effects this may have.

THE SHAKESPEAREAN PRESENCE IN DETECTIVE FICTION

Allusion to Shakespeare in detective fiction is a phenomenon that starts early in the development of the form; the principal change, as Susan Baker notes, has been that ‘the more recent the mystery, the more likely it is to *identify* the source of its Shakespearean citations’ (‘Comic Material’, 166). In Caroline Clive’s 1855 *Paul Ferroll*, Lady Lucy’s mad butler, Hamlet-like, thinks himself beckoned by a ghost whom only he can see (30), while Ferroll himself writes in his diary, ‘I went into Key’s district today, because he is ill and gone away. “Zounds! how has *he* the leisure to be sick, in such a justling time?”’ (42), asks ‘how’s Lancelot Gobbo; what do you call him—Caleb Balderstone?’ (66) and quotes Romeo’s ‘My bosom’s lord sits lightly on its throne’ (143). Most notably, Ferroll echoes Othello when he says in his diary that ‘dying together, and now, would be such a pleasure; we are so happy’ (39) and when he declares on New Year’s Eve that ‘I will put more logs on the fire, and the lamp has abundance of oil. It is only violence that could put out its light’ (155); if we had not already guessed that he himself was the murderer of his first wife we might do so now, but we could not yet divine that in fact the parallel is doubly apposite, because the revelation of his guilt will kill his second wife too. In Robert Barr’s 1906 *The Triumphs of Eugène Valmont*, ‘the utterances of an empty-headed ass dressed in a little brief authority, as the English poet says, were looked upon as the epitome of wisdom’ (11), Lord Chizelrigg’s uncle illegally sold ‘several priceless Shakespeares’ (91) and Lord Chizelrigg himself laments the lack of a ‘harmless, necessary hat-rack’ and refers to ‘my prophetic uncle’ (93) despite the fact that the uncle in question was not in the least prophetic. In E. C. Bentley’s 1913 *Trent’s Last Case*, classic literature initially seems to have no place given that in the library ‘Bound with a sober luxury, the great English novelists, essayists, historians, and poets stood ranged like an army struck dead in its ranks’ (37), but ‘Trent said to himself that the absurdity or otherwise of a lover writing sonnets to his mistress’s eyebrow depended after all on the quality of the eyebrow’ (70), the secretary Marlowe was in OUDS and ‘played Bardolph Cleon and Mercutio’ (106) and Trent finds ‘in Marlowe’s bedroom a photograph of himself and two others in the costume of Falstaff’s three followers, with an inscription from *The Merry Wives*’ (106), while Trent writing to Marlowe wonders, ‘Shall I compare him to a summer’s day?’ (134) and notes that ‘The wine here ... is almost certainly made out of grapes’ (167).

G. K. Chesterton is also a serial alluder. In ‘The Secret Garden’, one of the hobbies of an American millionaire, Julius K. Brayne, was ‘to wait for the American Shakespeare—a hobby more patient than angling’ (34) and ‘A low knocking came at the door, which, for some unreasonable reason, curdled everyone’s blood like the knocking in *Macbeth*’ (39). In ‘The Queer Feet’, Father Brown declares ‘every work of art, divine or diabolic, has one indispensable mark—I mean, that the centre of it is simple, however much the fulfilment may be complicated. Thus, in *Hamlet*, let us say, the grotesqueness of the grave-digger, the flowers of the mad girl, the fantastic finery of Osric, the pallor of the ghost and the grin of the skull are all oddities in a sort of tangled wreath round one plain tragic figure of a man in black’ (62). In ‘The Perishing of the Pendragons’, ‘Through a gap in the foliage there appeared for a moment one of those old wooden houses, faced with black beams, which are still to be found here and there in England, but which most of us see imitated in some show called “Old London” or “Shakespeare’s England”’ (228), and in ‘The Strange Crime of John Boulnois’ the would-be seducer casts the object of his schemes as Juliet to his Romeo.

In Dorothy Dunnett’s series of Johnson Johnson mysteries, one of the comic obituaries written by Charles in *Roman Nights* is

‘Full fathom five my father lies’
 ‘He fell off in a tender’
 ‘The herrings come up pickled there’
 ‘On gin from father’s bender’ (11)

Later in the same book, we find ‘the disapproving presence of Innes listening to Johnson giving an excruciating performance in Englishman’s German of a complete bowdlerized version of *Hamlet* with all the speaking parts and most of the action’ (164), and ‘With all his Player King instincts Maurice plunged through a high arching hall lined with fragments of marble which proved to be the fastest way on to the stage’ (177); in another of the stories, *Split Code*, we hear of ‘the sad, floating Ophelia of Hugo’s mad poncho’ (122), while even though the dyslexic Rita in *Tropical Issue* is not well placed to quote or recognise Shakespeare, Johnson calls her ‘Cordella’ when she walks out onto the caldera in an attempt to save her father (she fails); later, he jokingly alludes to *Hamlet* when he calls her ‘my prosthetic soul’ (298).

A more modern writer, Val McDermid, is also fond of Shakespearean allusion. In *The Torment of Others*, the acknowledgements include ‘I am

grateful to the Greenfield Girls for letting loose the dogs of narrative' and one of the two epigraphs is from *The Tempest*. In *The Grave Tattoo*, Fletcher Christian's narrative refers to Pitcairn as offering an opportunity 'to build a brave new world on our Prospero's Isle' (387). In *The Mermaids Singing*, the serial killer reproaches one of his/her victims: 'You didn't have the nerve for a marriage of true minds and bodies, did you?' (93); later the killer declares 'Shakespeare got it right when he said, "The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers"' (183), and when s/he realises that one of his/her objects of desire is dating a lawyer fumes, 'Frankly, I was with Shakespeare all the way' (184), while Carol says, 'the kills have to become more frequent. Shakespeare said it. "As if increase of appetite had grown by what it fed on"' (224). In *The Last Temptation*, the narrator says of Tadeusz's aristocratic grandmother, 'she'd dressed up her irrational convictions in the fancy clothes of literary allusion. So, rather than teach the boy that troubles come in threes, she'd enlisted Shakespeare's adage that "When sorrows come, they come not single spies, but in battalions"' (6). In *Star Struck*, the narrator notes wryly that 'There was nothing remotely glamorous about witnessing the seventh take of a scene that was a long way from Shakespeare to start with' (4) and that 'About ten per cent of the cast could play Shakespeare or Stoppard. The rest just roll up to the studios every week and play themselves' (42). In *The Wire in the Blood*, the information that Donna Doyle had been 'the Nurse in her form's reading of *Romeo and Juliet*' (5) subtly confirms that hers is a life worth saving, and in *The Distant Echo*, *Hamlet* is twice echoed as the wreaths sent by Rosie Duff's son say 'Rosemary for remembrance' and 'Lawson spun round, a guilty thing surprised' (522), as indeed he is.

Shakespeare is also a recurrent presence in the TV series *Inspector Morse* and its spin-offs *Lewis* and *Endeavour*; Sarah Olive argues that 'Shakespeare is only one of many icons used frequently in the *Inspector Morse/Lewis* franchise to denote quintessential Britishness' (Olive, 'Representations', 9). In the *Inspector Morse* episode, a character quotes *Macbeth* when he says, 'The wine of life is drawn and the mere lees is left this world to brag of'; in 'The Wolvercote Tongue', Morse quips, 'All these Danes—you never meet one called Hamlet, do you?'; in 'The Infernal Serpent', 'Who is Sylvia?' is asked of Cheryl Campbell's character and the other girl is called Imogen; in the *Lewis* episode 'Your Sudden Death Question', Hathaway suggests, 'We could take Shakespeare's advice and start by killing all the lawyers', and Nicholas Farrell's character says, 'Methinks the lady doth protest too much.' In 'Old Unhappy Far Off Things' we hear 'Man delights not

Diana—nor woman neither,’ while Hathaway, speculating on the killer’s motivation, says, ‘To be thus is nothing ... But to be safely thus.’ The *Morse* episode ‘The Death of the Self’, set in Verona and Vicenza, has Morse saying ‘Tis not so wide as a church door’ and then identifying the source to Lewis, while in the *Endeavour* episode ‘Trove’ the pathologist notes ‘Not how I’d my own quietus make’ and Bright says, ‘Once more unto the breach’, and in ‘Nocturne’ the book about the murders is called *Plighted Cunning*. In the *Lewis* episode ‘Music to Die For’ Hathaway says, ‘As he was valiant I honour him’; he also quotes Donne, and Lewis says, ‘Don’t give me William Shakespeare at this time of night.’ ‘Generation of Vipers’ opens with a lecture on Shakespeare’s women by a noted feminist scholar who subsequently commits suicide after it is revealed that she has posted a dating video online. She mentions ‘Cressida, who wished she was a man’, and we then see Ulysses’ degree speech being delivered as part of a project to record all of Shakespeare’s plays for the Internet, directed by a former student named Sebastian Dromgoole and including ‘Faithless Cressida, played by Mike’s tart of a girlfriend’. Later we keep hearing the beginning of the kissing scene. Infidelity and fears of it prove crucial threads in the storyline, including a false rumour spread 20 years ago by an anonymous student newspaper correspondent using the name ‘Thersites’. Surveillance is also important: Lewis’s and Hathaway’s glee at a TV report of their successful capture of a cannabis farmer is intercut with the don’s horror at her dating video being made public. As Sarah Olive notes of the *Lewis* episode, ‘Wild Justice’, which features references to a number of real and one faked Renaissance play, ‘the episode’s teasing invocation, and inversion, of authenticity offers complex pleasures for a wide-ranging audience, who even if they do not have all the cultural capital necessary to recognize the allusions and quotations precisely, can respond to the idea of intertextuality and metatheatricality’ (Olive, ‘Fabricated Evidence’, 84).

In E. W. Hornung’s Raffles stories, Raffles inaugurates his relationship with the narrator Bunny in the very first story by asking “Do you see what day it is?” ... , tearing a leaflet from a Shakespearean calendar as I drained my glass. “March 15th. ‘The Ides of March, the Ides of March, remember’” (10), and this proves to be the first of a number of allusions he makes to *Julius Caesar*: in the story called ‘The Field of Philippi’, “Then we meet again at Philippi,” cried Raffles in gay adieu’ (327) and Raffles, quoting some of Bunny’s own old verses about the play, says, ‘You may have forgotten your Shakespeare, Bunny, but you ought to remember that’ (334); on another occasion, when Bunny mistakes Raffles for a burglar and coshes him

he says, 'Et tu, Bunny!' (351). Raffles also says of his meeting with Jacques Saillard on the balcony, 'I don't say that Romeo and Juliet were brother and sister to us. But you might have said so, Bunny!' (217), while Bunny himself repeatedly boosts his stylistic credentials by Shakespearean allusion: 'all I had to do was indeed to "smile and smile and be a villain"' (88), Jacques Saillard looking from Raffles to her husband presented 'the face of one glancing indeed from Hyperion to a satyr' (216) and 'Conscience had made a coward of me' (331) all echo *Hamlet*; the Narrator's Note to the second volume promises 'all set forth (and nothing extenuated)' (131), which is bookended by the summation of them as 'these supplementary memoirs, wherein I pledged myself to extenuate nothing more that I might have to tell of Raffles' (373); when they are squatting and Raffles is reluctant to drink the owner's wine he proposes that 'since Brutus is such a very honourable man, we will borrow a bottle from the cellar, and replace it before we go' (298); and finally he refers to 'the quality of mercy which had undoubtedly been exercised on my behalf' (395).

Most notably, Shakespeare features in the tales of the Great Detective himself. In *A Study in Scarlet*, Watson declares of Holmes that 'His ignorance was as remarkable as his knowledge. Of contemporary literature, philosophy and politics he appeared to know next to nothing' (19). However, even Holmes can quote from Shakespeare. Later in *A Study in Scarlet*, he declares that 'if a man can stride four and a half feet without the smallest effort, he can't be quite in the sere and yellow' (39), in *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes*, Holmes, wondering why Mrs Maberley is worth burgling, asks her, 'You don't happen to have a Raphael or a first folio Shakespeare without knowing it?' (85), and several of the stories in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* make use of Shakespearean allusion. In 'A Case of Identity', Holmes says fact 'would make all fiction with its conventionalities and foreseen conclusions most stale and unprofitable' (55), and *Hamlet* is echoed again when Miss Mary Sutherland says of her mother and stepfather, who has a double relationship to her when he disguises himself as her suitor: 'I wasn't best pleased, Mr. Holmes, when she married again so soon after father's death' (59); in 'The Beryl Coronet', Alexander Holder says, 'One sorrow comes close upon the heels of another' (268), and in all three of 'The Copper Beeches', 'The Speckled Band' and 'A Case of Identity' the motive is basically that there shall be no more marriages. In *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*, Watson says of Holmes, 'I have usually found that there was method in his madness' (140), and Holmes himself says of Moriarty, 'This man's occupation is

gone' (262). In *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*, Holmes says in 'The Empty House', 'I trust that age doth not wither nor custom stale my infinite variety' (19), in 'The Three Students', 'By Jove! my dear fellow, it is nearly nine, and the landlady babbled of green peas at seven-thirty' (216), and in 'The Abbey Grange', 'The game is afoot' (271); in *The Final Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* we find 'I have always shared Caesar's prejudice against lean men' (42), 'stand not upon the order of your coming, but come at once' (43) and Tom saying to Jack 'No more of that, Hal, an you love me' (203), while Miss Warrender says that if she had someone who loved her she would tell him to 'Kill Copperthorne' (59). In *His Last Bow*, Holmes declares in 'The Adventures of the Red Circle', 'Journeys end with lovers' meetings' (72), and in 'The Adventure of the Dying Detective' Watson makes the suitably Horatio-like observation, 'Of all ruins, that of a noble mind is the most deplorable. I sat in silent dejection until the stipulated time had passed' (119).

CULTURAL CAPITAL

Shakespearean allusion serves a variety of purposes. First and most obviously, Shakespeare is an unimpeachable source of cultural capital, but at the same time one perceived as popular enough to be free of any connotations of elitism or inaccessibility. The most famous of all detective novelists, Agatha Christie, is generally considered middlebrow and is at times positively aggressive towards culture. In *They Came to Baghdad*, a supposed cultural organisation is a front for a Buchanesque secret organisation which wants to precipitate a third world war so a race of supermen can seize power. For them culture is a tool: as Dakin observes, 'where anything cultured is concerned, nobody examines *bona fides* in the way they would if it were a charitable or financial proposition' (214), and Dr Rathbone, who fronts the organisation, 'gets Shakespeare's and Milton's works translated into Arabic and Kurdish and Persian and Armenian and has them all on tap' (30). In the opinion of Mrs Cardew Trench, 'The more you try to get people together, the more suspicious they get of each other. All this poetry and music and translating Shakespeare and Wordsworth into Arabic and Chinese and Hindustani. "A primrose by the river's brim," etc ... what's the good of that to people who've never seen a primrose?' (128), and the clear implication is that she is right. Mrs Clayton may tell Victoria that Captain Crosbie is 'not quite quite ... Hasn't got any *idea* of culture' (82) and 'Marcus became quite serious at the mention

of culture'; however, he proceeds to give the game away when he says, 'It is what we need ... There must be much culture. Art and music, it is very nice, very nice indeed. I like violin sonatas myself if it is not very long' (125), while Victoria, who concurs about length, observes, 'I went to the British Museum once. It was awful, and dreadfully tiring on the feet' (227) and confesses 'I never quite got around to Milton ... But I did go and see *Comus* at Sadler's Wells and it was lovely' (228–9). Christie herself comes out firmly in support of the Philistines when she writes unblushingly that 'Victoria was just congratulating herself that she had made less mistakes than usual' (217); to say 'less' when one means 'fewer' may be common enough nowadays, but in 1951 it was an obvious solecism and it is striking that Christie is either ignorant of or indifferent to it. However, though Dr Rathbone starts out as a con merchant he comes to believe in the enterprise, and Shakespeare just about escapes censure when Dakin borrows his authority to say to Victoria, 'You seem to be a sensible young woman and I don't suppose you've thought much about world politics which is just as well, because as Hamlet very wisely remarked, "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so"' (173). Shakespearean allusion can also lend authority, as when Miss Marple insinuatingly asks, 'it *is* so important, isn't it, to be quite *sure*—"to make assurance doubly sure," as Shakespeare has it' (255); she may be merely an elderly spinster whose success depends on appearing unthreatening and unassuming, but here she can borrow the language of Shakespeare to disguise assertiveness as an appeal to shared values and to common sense.

In fact Shakespeare is a pervasive presence in Christie's work. She takes the titles of both *Sad Cypress* and *Taken at the Flood* from Shakespeare, though the master-text of the latter is in fact Tennyson's *Enoch Arden* and the presence of Shakespeare in it is more or less confined to the epigraph, David Hunter's musing that '*And we must take the current when it serves or lose our ventures*' (215), Lynn's rueful 'Oh! brave new world' as she 'contemplat[es] rising taxation and the servant shortage' (28), and Spence's reproach to Poirot, 'Don't quote Shakespeare ... This isn't Elizabethan Drama' (318). In *The Moving Finger*, Megan initially dismisses Shakespeare along with 'all the blathering stuff Shelley wrote, twittering on about skylarks, and Wordsworth going all potty over some silly daffodils' (35), and when she comes to stay with Jerry and Joanna, and Jerry observes that he expects they will have 'many interesting discussions about Shakespeare', Joanna laments, 'I can see you two are going to be very highbrow ... I'm afraid I always find Shakespeare terribly dreary.

All those long scenes where everybody is drunk and it's supposed to be funny' (101). However, Shakespeare proves to have his uses: Mr Pye exclaims 'Enter Rumour, painted full of tongues!' (204) and Megan's letter to Jerry says that while reading her school Shakespeare she read one of the sonnets 'and I see that I am in love with you after all, because that is what I feel' (284). In *Evil Under the Sun*, Linda has Shakespeare's plays among her books (186), and in *Murder in Mesopotamia*, Sheila Reilly says, 'The dead are past that. But the harm they've done lives after them sometimes. Not quite a quotation from Shakespeare but very nearly!' (193–4) and opines that Louise Leidner was 'a kind of female Iago' (195).

SHAKESPEARE AND LITERARY STATUS

Christie's primary focus is on the response of her characters to Shakespeare. However, Shakespearean allusion also has consequences for the reader and for the status of the text itself: it interpellates the reader and establishes the literary status of the text. G. K. Chesterton notes in 'The Ideal Detective Story' that 'The detective story differs from every other story in this: the reader is only happy if he feels a fool,' and yet feeling a fool is also a potentially unnerving and unsatisfying state. It can however be counteracted if one does not feel quite such a fool because one can at least recognise Shakespeare, and to recognise Shakespeare is to position oneself in a certain way, as Christie registers in *Taken at the Flood* where Rowley says that Rosaleen is 'careful ... about her accent—she's got quite a brogue, you know, or else about the right fork, and any literary allusions that might be flying around' (56). Shakespearean allusion, particularly to the better-known plays, can also provide a sense of a common culture. David Grossvogel suggests that Agatha Christie's later novels chart her 'growing sense of dismay at the assertion and vulgarity of new money, the deterioration of values formerly held, knowledge previously shared, the anxiety of exile from old assumptions into a world of rapid and radical change, where social contact could be only tentative and tenuous' (10); against this, Shakespeare asserts capital which is cultural rather than financial, bespeaks the continuing value of education and of reading, and offers the sense of a language that is still shared. In Mavis Doriel Hay's *The Santa Klaus Murder* the narrator is flummoxed when told by one of the family that while in the library she noticed that 'Gordon was there, with Shakespeare and the *Times* crossword' (195), concluding Shakespeare to be a house-guest he has not yet encountered, but the fact that one of the

chapter titles is 'Bad Dreams' (167), encoding an allusion to *Hamlet*, suggests that the reader is assumed to have rather more nous.

Detective fiction needs to position readers in this way for two main reasons. In the first place, it is generally nervous about the legitimacy of its own enterprise, because it can by no means be taken for granted that detection itself is a legitimate enterprise. Alongside a rather vaguely felt conviction that it is a citizen's duty to help the police typically sits an often more powerful view that doing so will almost certainly entail things that are literally, inherently and in absolute terms deplorable: reading other people's correspondence, eavesdropping on conversations, and generally prying into a sphere radically and inalienably constituted as private. In Hay's *Death on the Cherwell*, Sally says to Basil and Betty, 'there may be things the police mustn't find out' (75), and at the inquest Nina regards Miss Cordell, in her capacity as foreman of a jury, as 'playing a role which gave one the right to do one's best to baffle and mislead her' (269). Later the college porter says, 'There's a good many things that we find it better not to mention' (185), suggesting a thin veneer of discretion and shared values. In Andrew Forrester's *The Female Detective*, the unnamed heroine acknowledges from the outset, 'I am well aware that my trade is despised' (2), and that 'society looks upon the companionship of a spy as repulsive' (3); on one of the rare occasions when she discloses her identity to someone she is investigating she refers to herself as 'one of the secret police' (78), and later observes, 'I am afraid many a kindly-disposed advertisement hides the hoof of detection' (290). The potential equation of detection with prying is exacerbated by the sense that detectives typically ferret out information that has nothing to do with the case they are investigating: in Christie's *After the Funeral*, Poirot says, 'I am discreet and what I learn does not concern me. But I have to *know*' (228). The only thing that can justify violation of this ethos of privacy being sacrosanct is if the policeman too is an insider, and allowing him to quote Shakespeare is a foolproof way of constituting him as one;¹ this is particularly marked in the case of Ngaio Marsh's Alleyn, both the most intrinsically inquisitive and also the most sustainably Shakespearean of detectives.

Another reason for detective fiction to be nervous is that it is often explicitly aware that its literary status is often embattled: in Nicholas Blake's *The Beast Must Die*, for instance, the narrator, himself a pseudonymous

¹T. J. Binyon notes that 'Victor MacClure's ... Chief Detective Archie Burford ... astonishes his Oxford-educated sergeant with apposite quotations from Shakespeare' (88).

detective novelist, frets that ‘I am unable to convince myself that detective fiction is a serious branch of literature’ (13). Because of that, it is almost equally anxious about both the morality and motives of its readers. What kind of person enjoys murder? In Runa Fairleigh’s *An Old-Fashioned Mystery*, Sebastian’s definition of a reader of detective stories is ‘someone who’s a voyeur, who’s obviously a sadist, who possesses abundant knowledge of the ways in which pain and death can be inflicted. Who likes to see it done’ (228); the authors of such books, he adds, are ‘homicidal maniacs’ (235). In Val McDermid’s *The Torment of Others*, Tony resents the fact that ‘donors wanted the vicarious, voyeuristic thrill of the war stories they tried to cajole from him’ (8), and most detective fiction makes little attempt to conceal or sidestep the shamelessness of its readers’ curiosity. In Marsh’s *Light Thickens*, when Maggie Mannerling leaves the theatre after the murder of Dougal Macdougall, ‘The car began to back down the alleyway. Greedy faces at the windows. Impudent faces. Curious, grinning faces’ (380)—the faces of those who read detective fiction.

Even if detective fiction is granted to be literary, there are obvious questions about its relationship to reality. In Eric Ambler’s *The Mask of Dimitrios*, Colonel Haki opines to the detective novelist Charles Latimer, ‘I find the murderer in a *roman policier* much more sympathetic than a real murderer. In a *roman policier* there is a corpse, a number of suspects, a detective and a gallows. This is artistic. The real murderer is not artistic’ (22). To a certain extent, literary allusion may offer a way to negotiate that sense of a lack of realism by stressing design, sometimes in ways that suggest that Providence is at work, and that it is therefore hardly surprising if events seem to be shaped and patterned rather more than one might normally expect. In this Shakespearean allusion can play a very useful part, as in Clive’s *Paul Ferroll*, where familiarity with the plot of *Othello* may help the reader guess at the plot of *Paul Ferroll* itself. In this respect, Shakespearean allusion speaks to and enhances the peculiar comforts of detective fiction. The best may lack all conviction, but the detective always knows; in Dorothy L. Sayers’ *Strong Poison*, Wimsey tells his sister-in-law Helen that Harriet Vane cannot be guilty because ‘she writes detective stories, and in detective stories virtue is always triumphant. They’re the purest literature we have’ (143).

THE CHAPTERS

The book consists of four further chapters, ‘Wild Justice: Mercy, Revenge and the Detective’, ‘Who Owns the Wood? Appropriating *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*’, ‘Border Patrol: Shakespearean Allusions and Social and