**EXTRACT from Christopher Yiannitsaros, "“Tea and scandal at four-thirty”: Fantasies of Englishness and Agatha Christie’s Fiction of the 1930s and 1940s’." *Clues: A Journal of Detection* 35.2 (2017): 78-88.**

The idea of Englishness as a descriptor of a particular national character is, moreover, paradoxical. National identity, as a concept, has become seemingly naturalized, and underpins one of the primary ways that the world is organized, yet it is arguably a relatively recent invention linked to the advent of industrialization, religious redefinition in Europe, and the rise of both the middle classes and literacy levels. Furthermore, a person’s nationality is arguably the most tenuous of all their personal markers of identity. Other taxonomies of identification such as age, gender, sexuality, or race implicate a person’s physical form more directly and are thus seen as incontrovertible and largely self-evident. However, an individual’s national identity pertains only to the country in which they happen to have been born and thus, particularly within the context of the advances to transportation brought about by global modernity, is completely arbitrary in a way that these other markers of identity, however contestable in their own right, are not. The disconcerting arbitrariness of national identity formation is one of the rationales behind Benedict Anderson’s argument that every nation is an “imagined . . . community” (6). For a person to think of themselves as belonging to a particular nation state, he argues, a “deep, horizontal comradeship” needs to be established between that person and all others who share the same marker of national identity (7). -

-while national identity is abstractly connected to notions of landscape, language, and events of historical significance (most often war, which tends to be propagated not only as a national story, but as *the* national story), it is also defined by something less easily quantifiable. Whilst the caption “The Heart of England” reproduces a colloquialism by which the regional district of the West Midlands is known, it additionally suggests an act of anthropomorphism, intimating that England has a heart, a life-source, a spirit. Through an examination of three Christie novels from the 1930s and 1940s—*The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930), *Dumb Witness* (1937), and *The Hollow* (1946)—this article seeks to reassess



the articulation of English national identity within her fiction, arguing that it is significantly more dissident and ambivalent than has been previously recognized.

## *The Murder at the Vicarage*

Christie’s 1930 novel *The Murder at the Vicarage* is set in St. Mary Mead, a village located somewhere within the fictionalized county of “Downshire.” One Wednesday lunchtime, local vicar Leonard Clement inopportunely remarks “that anyone who murdered Colonel Protheroe would be doing the world at large a service” (*Murder* 7). Coincidentally enough, the next evening Clement finds the village’s least popular resident slumped over his writing desk after a shot to the head. Although the colonel’s wife, Anne, and her lover, Lawrence Redding, both confess to the murder, they are quickly ruled out as suspects, as it appears that each one has only confessed because they suspect the other is guilty. However, by the novel’s close, Miss Marple helps the police to realize that the first set of “confessions” were a double bluff, and the patently too-obvious pair are indeed the culprits, as Anne shot her husband with the revolver that Lawrence left *in situ* within the vicarage. The novel’s ambivalence toward dominant conceptions of English national identity is particularly noticeable in its evoking of the imaginative process of contradistinction that Edward Said would come to term *Orientalism*. As Susan Rowland notes, Orientalism

involves a Western national identity "constructed by projection onto a homogenized Eastern 'Other' of precisely what the occidental is supposed not to be: irrational, savage, and dark" (62). Throughout Christie's novel, the image of savagery functions as a *leitmotif* that refers not to England's dark, far-off colonies but rather to St. Mary Mead's native "English" residents. Of particular significance is the novel's tea party where Griselda Clement performs her "duty as Vicaress" and entertains a group of elderly spinsters (*Murder* 12). Thus the novel's portrayal of Englishness could almost be characterized by what, on the surface, appears to be a quietly domestic image of "[t]ea and scandal at four-thirty" (12). Reading this episode in light of Said's theory of Orientalism, however, suggests a more serious critique on Christie's part of the use of Orientalist practices in the imaginative manufacturing of English national identity. As Griselda and her husband deliberate about which local controversy is most likely to be discussed at the forthcoming party, Griselda comments, "I wonder what we should have for tea . . . Dr. Stone and Miss Cram, I suppose, and perhaps Mrs. Lestrange" (13). At its most literal level, this seemingly light-hearted quip invokes an image of cannibalism. This initial introduction of cannibalistic consumption is then further compounded by Griselda's actions at the gathering itself, in which, to relieve her growing boredom, she decides to fabricate a story about the late husband of the enigmatic Mrs. Lestrange:

> "As a matter of fact—" said Griselda in a low, mysterious voice, and stopped. Everyone leaned forward excitedly.
>
> "I happen to *know*," said Griselda impressively. "Her husband was a missionary. Terrible story. *He was eaten.* Actually eaten. And she was forced to become the head chief's wife. Dr. Haydock was with an expedition and rescued her." (*Murder* 27; emphasis in original)

As Said suggests, what belies the putative division of the world into the enlightened, civilized occident and the dark, mysterious orient is that "each category . . . [is] not so much a neutral designation as an evaluative interpretation" (227). There is, therefore, an implicit comparative function embedded within Orientalist thinking, meaning that each category



only "makes sense" through its perceived difference from the other. One prime example of this logic is the notion that people from civilized Western regions do not eat their companions, whereas Eastern "savages" very well may do so. In Christie's tacit comparison between the consumption of salacious gossip and the cannibalistic consumption of human flesh, the former—a commonplace activity of what the reader has thus far been encouraged to view as the quintessentially English village—is subversively presented precisely in terms of the so-called savage behaviors against which that Englishness defines itself. Moreover, and as previously mentioned, the descent from what is conceived of as civilized, acceptably English behavior is not limited to this one incident but has a recurring presence throughout the novel and is especially manifest in Christie's repeated use of animal imagery to describe her characters. Griselda considers Miss Marple to be a "[n]asty old cat," and the vicar characterizes the youths of the village as "animal wraiths" and is horrified by his wife's description of him—in a particularly colonially tinged image—as acting "like an angry tiger" (*Murder* 31, 17, 31). Ultimately, Christie's repeated use of this imagery works to undermine further a propagated version of Englishness that is too heavily reliant upon internalized differentiation with England's barbaric, colonial "others."

Anthony Easthope argues that comedy remains central to the ways in which English national identity has been conceived: that a "'sense of humour' is felt to be very close to the heartlands of Englishness, and this is implied by any number of jokes about the humourlessness of other nationalities" (160). Although an English comic style is not easily classified (it is perhaps more accurate to suggest the existence of English *humors*, plural), it is possible to argue that the comic mode usually considered as quintessentially English

involves a deft blending of outrageous farce with sharp social satire. With Christie's novels originally conceived as middlebrow entertainment rather than literary art, it is not surprising that a strain of this ostensibly English style of comedy is overtly present in *The Murder at the Vicarage*. It may play into the previously mentioned cliché outlines—namely that of the Englishman stupefied by the deficit of humor in other nationalities—but the fact that one of Christie's recent American commentators does not "get" that *The Murder at the Vicarage* is intended as a funny book makes for a telling reference point for the implied Englishness of Christie's use of comedy. According to James Zemboy, it is actually

> quite a humorless book. The murder victim, a detestable person, fortunately dies early but the other characters are nearly as unpleasant as he is, each in his or her own way. The narrator, Leonard Clement, is a compassionate, Christian person but not very interesting otherwise. The issue of his young wife's being an incompetent housemaid is a rather silly, trivial subject, only mildly amusing and actually more tiresome than amusing. (62)

Such a stony-faced assessment demands interrogation (note Zemboy's increasing irritation and the change of mind as he further ponders the matter). The murder of a "pompous old brute" whose chief business in life is to go "blustering along, stirring up trouble everywhere, mean as the devil"? (Christie, *Murder* 9, 46). A man of the cloth married to a woman who is "incompetent in every way, and extremely trying to live with . . . treat[ing] the parish as a kind of huge joke arranged for her amusement"? (*Murder* 9). These are precisely the aspects that make Christie's novel so unashamedly humorous. Zemboy's pronouncement of Clement as "uninteresting" is moreover unfounded, as the vicar arguably provides the lion's share of the novel's comedy through his delightfully droll narration:

> Dennis . . . was highly entertained by the history of Mrs Price Ridley's [abusive] telephone call, and went into fits of laughter as I enlarged upon the nervous shock her system had sustained and the necessity of reviving her with damson gin.



> "Serve the old cat right," he exclaimed. "She's got the worst tongue in the place. I wish I'd thought of ringing her up and giving her a fright. I say, Uncle Len, what about giving her a second dose?"
>
> I hastily begged him to do nothing of the sort. Nothing is more dangerous than the well-meant efforts of the younger generation to assist you and show their sympathy. (*Murder* 167)

The vicar's mordant commentary upon the refractory behavior of his family and parishioners is funny precisely because it is a *private* commentary that exists in stark contrast to his acute inability—in person—to make his disapproval felt or to command the respect befitting of his position within both household and community at large. Chiming with the novel's delight in comic insubordination more generally, it is unsurprising that a significant proportion of its comedy is facilitated precisely through the breakdown of communication between master and servant. Commenting on the ways in which comedy has been utilized by English culture for the purpose of revisioning of its own Englishness, Andy Medhurst argues that the "situation in which . . . comedy takes place . . . needs to recognisable, to fit a mold, to be culturally legible for the humour to work, and there is no more crucial social mold in England than class" (145). He suggests that, for this reason, English comedy has often been associated with "milk[ing] laughs from the abrasions caused by classes scraping up against each other" (145). This is certainly true of *The Murder at the Vicarage* and is particularly evident in the relationship between the vicar and his housekeeper, Mary, who ironically lacks the domestic and culinary skills needed for her occupation. In the novel's opening family lunch scene, Clement and company have the pleasure of dining on "remarkably tough" beef, vegetables served in a "cracked dish," with "singularly moist and unpleasant dumplings" as well as a "partially cooked rice pudding" (*Murder* 7, 8, 12). Farcical comedy often is facilitated through an exaggeration of character, and thus it is not only a single

component of Mary's dinner that is bad: *every* constituent dish is horrendous. Moving from exaggeration to understatement, the vicar's response to this complete collapse of social and domestic etiquette: to assert "mild protest" (*Murder* 12). One criticism habitually leveled against Christie is that her "thinness of characterization . . . [and] relative lack of psychological insight" often have been interpreted as an artistic failing rather than as a conscious strategy (Messent 135). It is, however, possible to suggest instead that her portrayal of working-class characters within *The Murder at the Vicarage* is not only a means of commenting upon the stringent social structures indicative of the interwar English village but also is an essential component of the novel's English comic style: it belongs to what Medhurst describes as the strain of English comedy "characterised by thwarted appetites, unsatisfied urges, coping strategies and the solace of laughter" (145). In the Clements' case, these thwarted appetites are, of course, quite literal.