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"Girls aren't what they used to be": renegotiating gender roles in Agatha Christie's Beresford novels

"Le ragazze non sono più quelle di una volta": ripensare i ruoli di genere nei romanzi di Tommy e Tuppence

Abstract

The essay aims at analysing the figure of the flapper heroine in Christie's Beresford novels. Tuppence Beresford, the most popular among Christie's courageous young adventurers, embodies the social and economic independence that various women were experiencing during and after the years of the Great War. She is outspoken, resolute and meets physical danger. She moves between the public and the private spaces using the limits society imposes on women to her advantage. Although Christie does not make her the leading detective of the adventures, Tuppence's relationship with Tommy is based on equality and the final solutions are the result of an equal partition of roles. With the Beresford novels, Christie renegotiates her idea of marriage. Marriage is 'a joint venture' where traditional gender roles are destabilised and women's association with the domestic sphere is often questioned. Tuppence defends her right to be considered an equal partner both in marriage and in life and balances her private life with professional responsibilities.
*Keywords***:** flapper heroine; gender roles; Golden Age; Agatha Christie; detective fiction

Abstract

Il saggio prende in esame la figura di Tuppence Beresford, un esempio di donna moderna secondo Agatha Christie. Tuppence personifica quella indipendenza sociale ed economica che le donne iniziano ad acquisire durante e dopo gli anni della Grande Guerra. Tuppence sa bilanciare la propria vita privata con gli impegni professionali e sfrutta a suo vantaggio i limiti che la società impone alle donne.

Con i romanzi di Tommy e Tuppence, Christie mette in discussione la relazione tra donne e sfera domestica e sovverte i ruoli di genere tradizionali. La donna non è relegata ai soli compiti domestici, ma partecipa attivamente alle avventure in un rapporto di parità sia sul piano professionale che privato. I due investigatori, infatti, incarnano un esempio di collaborazione personale e professionale tra uomo e donna.

Historical framework

In his prominent work *The Age of Extremes,* the Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm discusses how the outbreak of World War I in August 1914 marked the beginning of the short twentieth century (Hobsbawm 1995). In Hobsbawm's account, the short century is composed of three separate periods – the Age of Catastrophe, the Golden Age, the Crisis Decades – and ends with the reunification of Germany and with the collapse of the Soviet Union at the start of the 1990's. The Great War of 1914-18, he argues, was the defining event of the century.

In Britain, the war acted as a catalyst for social change, sweeping away much of the old Victorian and Edwardian order, with their long-held beliefs about social classes and work. At the outbreak of the hostilities, the war seemed to restore order and distinction between the sexes. It was an occasion to demonstrate manhood and courage, «a test of virility offering opportunities for glory and heroism» (Grayzel 2010, p. 264). Grayzel notices how recruiting posters in Britain tried to enlist men by emphasising the virility of those who responded. The men who remained at home were believed to be unfit to defend the homeland, a shame and a dishonour for every man. Initially, the war broadened the boundary between the home front and the war front, between the masculine domain of battle and the feminised sphere of domesticity and civilian life. The myth of the man defender of the motherland collides with the image of the woman angel and guardian of the home. The prolongation of the war distorted this polarity. Apart from the risks and inconveniences, men perceived the stay at the front as a sort of segregation, of marginalisation from their own world: fighting in the war required endurance and adaptation to a substantial, very risky passivity, while women at home saw their duties and responsibilities multiplied. As a matter of fact, the Great War marked a period characterised by deep gender negotiations, when the modern girl entered the labour market (Makinen 2006, p. 4). The immediate post-war period revealed some feeble but encouraging signs for women in British society. From the granting of the vote to women

over thirty (1918), to the right to obtain degrees from Oxford (1920), World War I paved the way to new opportunities for British women. Deirdre Beddoe and Megan Hoffman emphasise the major role the Great World played in granting women jobs outside the domestic sphere. By 1915, they argue, women were gradually encouraged to supplant men in factories, offices, shops, on the railways and on the trams, «previously unacceptable jobs» (Klein 1988, p. 96). When «the gendered lines drawn between the domestic and public spheres became increasingly blurred» (Hoffman 2016, p. 15) numerous women found themselves working outside the home for the first time.

Naturally, it was a change that affected particularly middle-class women, considering that their working-class sisters already toiled when circumstances required. Economic necessity was the only tolerable reason for a woman to work, since feminine respectability meant keeping away from the masculine world of employment and business. The historian Arthur Marwick argues how middle-class women's condition changed during the war, when they acquired a growing independence: «[n]ow they were earning money on their own account, they had economic independence; now they were working away from home, they had social independence» (Marwick 1991, p. 134). Susan Pyecroft discusses how numerous educated women who had never worked before responded to the nation's need to occupy those vacant jobs shortly left by soldiers (Pyecroft 1994, p. 703). Pyecroft argues that munitions work proved to be the most popular area for registration, followed by clerical and agricultural work (Pyecroft 1994, p. 703). Factories offered higher wages than domestic service had done. Female factory workers dared gender roles: they were earning much more than previously and the new experiences gave them the opportunity to display their ability to carry out skilled labour in areas previously barred to them. Specifically, the diverse chores women now performed in wage labour questioned gender relations: «[w]omen's role in manufacturing weapons challenged a powerful gendered taboo, as women now seemed to be participating in the culture of death instead of performing their 'natural' roles as givers of life» (Grayzel 2010, p. 276). Women also gained access to male professions such as law and accountancy and they were enabled to be jurors and magistrates for the first time with the passage of the Sex Disqualification Removal Act (1919).

These changes, however, did not result in eradicating the existing inequalities and the societal beliefs about women's accepted role. Despite a greater involvement of women in the man-oriented public space, unequal gender relations prevailed and

continued to do so after the war. The historian Gail Braybon states that women's increased presence in the workplace did not change popular and societal expectations concerning gender roles: «[w]omen themselves may have gained much from the experience of war work, but men's attitudes to them were another matter» (Braybon 1981, p. 157). The interwar years were characterised by a continuous oscillation between the desire for change and the need to return to the traditional pre-war scheme of life. The end of World War I meant restoring a pre-war normalcy that affected women workers in the first place. As soldiers returned to Britain in 1918, women were asked to return to the place where they traditionally belonged, the domestic sphere, with marriage and motherhood as their only fulfilment. The Restoration of Pre-War Practices Act of 1918 forced numerous women to give up their wartime jobs in favour of returning service members (McCalman 1971, p. 39). Kathleen Gregory Klein discusses how public opinion, that had previously encouraged women to take up men's job for the sake of the nation, was hostile to those women workers who, after the end of the war, kept those jobs. They were seen, Klein writes, «as leeches and bloodsuckers for wanting decent wages and not willing to go back to domestic work» (Klein 1988, p. 97). For this reason, Klein describes the period after World War I in Britain as «a time of antifeminism» (Klein 1988, p. 97). It was also a period concerned about acceptable and unacceptable modes of femininity. For Gill Plain those include several stereotypes that ranged from «the frivolity of the flapper» passing through «virgins, whores and respectable mothers» to «the stigma of the superfluous woman» (Plain 2014, p. 46).

Female authorship and readership: the rise of the detective novel

Such concerns regarding gender roles characterise a period when popular fiction in the form of detective novels began to proliferate. The British production of detective fiction in vogue during the interbellum period is commonly labelled as the Golden Age. Howard Haycraft is generally regarded as the first writer to use the expression, dating that time from 1918 to 1930 (Haycraft 1941). In his history of the detective story, *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel*, Julian Symons devotes two chapters to the Golden Age, that he identifies with the 1920s and 1930s (Symons 1992). Though critics commonly regard the outbreak of World War II as its end, several writers continued writing in the Golden Age style after 1939.

During the Golden Age, women writers and readers play a fundamental role in defining the new form of detective fiction. Critics and scholars have often emphasised the gendered dimension of British Golden Age fiction. Lee Horsley notes that the Golden Age is a period during which detective fiction became dominated by «feminized investigators» and domestic settings (Horsley 2010, p. 32). John Scaggs declares that the Golden Age was defined by the Queens of Crime Christie, Sayers, Allingham and Marsh (Scaggs 2005, p. 26). For Alison Light, instead, women crime fiction writers should be read in a continuum with their highbrow sisters, for their creative contributors to the middlebrow novel of the interwar epoch and for «their reworking of what had formerly been a largely masculine genre» (Light 1991, p. 70). For Susan Rowland, «the female Golden Age writers» were able to «construct fictions with and against a masculine Holmesian genre» (Rowland 2001, p. 24). Sally Munt insists that the Golden Age spans from Christie's first novel (1920) to the last one written by Dorothy Sayers (1937), «its two aphoristic pillars» (Munt 1994, p.7).

Equally important was the role women readers played in the development of the new form. In this regard, Charles J. Rzepka writes that Christie's readership was «largely female» (Rzepka 2005, p. 157), noting that during the Golden Age «detective fiction shifted […] away from adventures elements that had traditionally appealed to male readers and towards plots of ratiocination […] which most women at the time were more inclined to admire» (Rzepka 2005, p. 158). For Stephen Knight, an important factor in the development of the new form was the gender of its audience (Knight 2003, p. 81). In his chapter on the Golden Age in *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fictio*n, Knight argues:

> The magazines that carried short stories […] were designed for men […] But lending libraries […] were the basic medium for dissemination of the new clue-puzzle novels had a 75 percent female audience. The tendency towards intellect and observation, rather than heroic action, and the marked limitation of strong masculinity in the detective heroes shape a form which is increasingly read, and written, by women (Knight 2003, p. 81).

The newly born Golden Age detective novel contributed to increase the number of readers, especially women who were regular frequenters of lending libraries. In *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*, Knight argues that the establishment of this new type of detective fiction – the novel with a longer plot and a subplot – encouraged a female

readership «whom earlier crime stories did not interest and satisfy» (Knight 1980, p. 107). The abandonment of a heroic masculinity for a feminised detective moving within the domestic sphere proves to be one of the major features of the interwar detective fiction.

Agatha Christie starts writing detective novels during those turbulent years of the Great War – years characterised by deep gender debates – when she was working as a dispenser at Torquay hospital. Although she is often depicted as a conservative writer harking back with nostalgia to the Edwardian times where gender roles were fixed, her novels somehow embrace the anxieties of those stormy years. Previous critics have often argued that Christie does not engage with social contemporary problems, depicting a utopian conservative society inhabited by stock figures where social order is resumed at the end of the novel. By contrast, for Earl Bargainnier and Merja Makinen Christie's novels mirror, unconsciously, those social changes spanning from the 1920's to the 1970's. Bargainnier argues that she «left a social history of fifty years of upper middleclass English life» reflecting «the feelings of numerous people in the twentieth century about their world past and present» (Bargainnier 1980, p. 37). For this reason, Gordon C. Ramsey compares her to a social historian (Ramsey 1968, p. 33). Makinen claims that Christie's novels document cultural and societal changes as well as those changes occurring in relation to «acceptable femininities» (Makinen 2006, p. 6). For Susan Rowland, her fiction encourages «female self-expression» (Rowland 2001, p. 158), while Meghan Hoffman identifies her fiction and, more in general, Golden Age detective fiction as «an ideal space in which to explore issues that accompany changing models of femininity» (Hoffman 2016, p. 1).

Tuppence the flapper heroine

Tuppence Beresford, the detective heroine that makes her debut together with Tommy in Christie's 1922 spy-thriller *The Secret Adversary*, personifies a new model of femininity that comes forward during the interwar years, the figure of the modern woman, economically independent. In her study of Christie and femininity, Makinen describes the figure of the intrepid young adventurer of the 1920s with the adjective «comradely» (Makinen 2006, p. 75), a term that recurs also in Nicola Humble's *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*. For Gill Plain, this new figure personifies «the boy-girl, the antithesis of traditional female sexuality» (Plain 2014, p. 43), while for Mellissa Schaub this boyish heroine is a Female Gentleman, «a woman who is competent, courageous, and self-reliant

in practical situations, capable of subordinating her emotions to reason and the personal good to the social good» (Schaub 2013, p. 8). Schaub stresses the resemblance the Female Gentleman shares with the New Woman (Schaub 2013, p. 58) emphasising that she embodies, as her forerunner, the antithesis of the Victorian Angel in the House. In female-authored British detective novels of the interwar period, the Female Gentleman becomes a recurrent figure. In Christie's 1920's fiction, several flapper heroines make their debut: Dulcie Duveen of *The Murder on the Links* (1923), Virginia Revel and Lady Bundle Brent in *The Secret of Chimneys* (1925) – Lady Bundle Brent returns later as the protagonist in *The Seven Dials Mystery* (1929). The most popular of these young adventurers remains Tuppence, «the most gentlemanly of Christie's heroines» (Schaub 2013, p. 77).

Several critics have condemned the Tommy and Tuppence novels as «weaker than Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple stories» (Bynion 1989, p. 68). Julian Symons calls them «inferior tales not suited to the Christie talent» (Symons 2002, p. 78) whereas Stephen Knight believes they are «simplistic and jingoistic mystery adventures» (Knight 2004, p. 93). According to Robert Barnard, Tommy and Tuppence are «everybody least favourite sleuths» (Barnard 1980, p. 14). Earl Bargainnier keeps the distance from those hostile interpretations and believes the lack of appreciation of the Beresford novels is a consequence of a misinterpretation of the comicality that represents the major feature of the duo. For Bargainnier, Tommy and Tuppence are a comic duo and, therefore, they should be accepted as «comic versions of the amateur detective» (Bargainnier 1980, p. 78). Similarly, Light stresses the comic side of Christie's thrillers, linking Tommy and Tuppence first novel's «airy manner» to the modernist rejection of stuffy seriousness (Light 1991, p. 69).

Critics concerned with gender issues, such as Meghan Hoffman (2016), Susan Rowland (2001), Gillian Gill (1990), Gill Plain (2011), Merja Makinen (2006), Patricia Maida and Nicholas Spornick (1982), have viewed the novels differently, focusing, in particular, on the figure of Tuppence as the modern woman, and on the active role she detains within the couple. Patricia Craig and Mary Cadogan argue that «[o]f all the husband-and-wife detection teams, Tommy and Tuppence come nearest to representing an equal partnership. They take the initiative by turns and Tuppence is as quick off the mark as her spouse» (Craig and Cadogan 1986, p. 81). Their partnership commences in the aftermath of World War I, a period when gender roles were being questioned and the detective novel was gradually shaping a feminised masculinity, that, as Light argues, «had

been the disastrous complement to that heroic masculinity destroyed in the war» (Light 1991, p. 108). For Light, the new detectives appearing in the 1920s are «garrulous» and full of «banalities» (Light 1991, p. 73). Tommy Beresford falls into this description, a man who has nothing heroic, ordinary looking, who believes the couple's success is due to a stroke of luck. His ordinariness and reflexive masculinity contrasts with the vigour that characterises Tuppence. When she is introduced to the readers, she is wearing «an extremely short and rather shabby skirt» that reveals «a pair or uncommonly dainty ankles»[1]. During World War I a fashion revolution took place, and the long skirts became a few inches shorter, permitting a greater freedom of movement. The skirt exemplifies Tuppence's active femininity. Likewise, the physical descriptions of the two are opposite. Tommy is «ugly» and «nondescript» (SA, p. 198) while Tuppence displays «character and charm» (SA, p. 199), a «determined chin» (SA, p. 199) and her appearance reveals «a valiant attempt at smartness» (SA, p. 199).

The genesis of the couple derives from the author's personal experience, as Christie recollects in her *Autobiography* (Christie 2001b, p. 281). Tuppence had served in a hospital during the Great War – as young Agatha – while Tommy had served in the British army, like Christie's first husband (SA, p. 199). When they meet in London after the war at the beginning of *The Secret Adversary*, Tuppence insists that since they are both financially distressed they should each pay for their own tea: «My dear child [...] there is nothing I do not know about the cost of living [...] we will each of us pay for our own. That's that! » (SA, p. 198). Tuppence refuses the social convention of a man paying for her tea, showing, since the beginning, the active role she plays in the couple. While they are having tea chatting about the difficulties they are encountering to find a proper job, Tuppence comes up with the idea of a «joint venture» (SA, p. 203) or, as she suggests while writing an advertisement «two young adventurers for hire» (SA, p. 204). She, once again, pays her own share to have the advertisement published and mocks Tommy for his diffidence. Her business-like attitude disappoints her father's «early Victorian view» (SA, p. 201), a man who regards short skirts and smoking as immoral and would like his daughter to devote herself to «housework and mother's meetings» (SA, p. 201). Tuppence, by contrast, labels those domestic activities as «awful» and sees herself as a

[1] Agatha Christie, *The Secret Adversary*, London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995, p. 199. Further references are to this edition cited parenthetically in the text as SA.

«changeling» (SA, p. 201). She prefers sleeping in a rundown hostel rather than live in a Victorian-ruled house (SA, p. 205).

The very first engagement for the young adventurers is owed to Tuppence. When Mr Carter, their first employer, warns them against the dangerous risks of the case, Tommy replies, «I'll look after her, sir» (SA, p. 228). Tuppence, «resenting the manly assertion» responds «And *I'll* look after you» (SA, p. 228), thus refusing the social convention of the hero protecting the heroine. Tuppence rejects the role of the submissive partner, encouraging, as Hoffman and Makinen argue, an equality within their relationship (Makinen 2006, p. 29; Hoffman 2016, p. 102). Tuppence's refusal of being the weaker partner is echoed in subsequent novels, as well as the relationship of parity that exists within the duo. In *Partners in Crime*, a short story collection published in 1929, the two get married. Tommy takes up again the role of the masculine hero «I can look after her all right, sir», he states, triggering Tuppence's reaction «I can take care of myself».[2] In the third novel with the duo as the main characters, *N or M?* (1941), the British Intelligence excludes Tuppence and hires Tommy to track down some German agents. When Tommy is asked to convince Tuppence to «stay home and keep out of danger»[3], he refuses to accept the new assignment without her. «I don't know that I really would do that» (NM, p. 44). He confesses the ingredient that makes their relationship so lasting, «We go into things – together! » (NM, p. 44). In *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* (1968), Deborah, the couple's daughter, is worried about her mother. « 'I wish to goodness you could look after Mother properly,' said Deborah severely. 'None of us have ever been able to look after her properly,' said Tommy».[4] In their last novel, *Postern of Fate* (1973), the motif of a partnership based on equality returns, to symbolise that the equality on which they established their relationship, including the working one, lasts over the years. « 'Take care of Tuppence and tell Tuppence to take care of you'».[5]

Earning her own living is the boyish heroine's major ability. Tuppence is financially independent due to her own talents. She does not conceal her interest in money. One of the first things she makes clear with Mr Carter in *The Secret Adversary* is

[2] Agatha Christie, *Partners in Crime*, London: HarperCollins, 1995, p. 209.
Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as PIC.
[3] Agatha Christie, *N or M?* New York and Toronto: Bantam Books, 1988, p. 44.
Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as NM.
[4] Agatha Christie, *By the Pricking of My Thumbs*, London: Harper-Collins, 2001, p. 261.
[5] Agatha Christie, *Postern of Fate*, London and New York: Harper Paperback, 1991, p. 188.
Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as POF.

the amount of her salary (SA, p. 230). As a woman depending entirely on her own, the 'joint venture' becomes for her a financial opportunity that allows her the freedom of living away from her archdeacon father and his strict Victorian values. Tuppence is the partner that, in the aftermath of the conversation with Mr Carter, takes the reins of the situation and plans the work to be done starting on the two clues the couple has: «I propose to reason in a logical manner» (SA, p. 237), she commences. Tommy, for his part, is mainly concerned about food and meals « 'How like a man! What does mere food matter?' » (SA, p. 237) and parodies Tuppence's investigative plan, labelling her Sherlock. Their relationship is built on reciprocity as they continually exchange the roles of detective and sidekick. While with the figures of Poirot and Hastings Christie resumes the model of Sherlock Holmes and Watson, where one acts as the detective and the other as the sidekick, with Tommy and Tuppence there is no relationship of subordination. They both perform the role of the investigator and sidekick when necessary, proving that their relationship is built on equality and mutual respect.

When the investigation to find the elusive Jane Finn and a secret treaty to stop a Bolshevist conspiracy begins, Tommy ends up kidnapped by a criminal organisation the head of which is the mysterious Mr Brown, «one of the biggest brains of the century» (SA, p. 382). Tuppence, for her part, refuses to wait passively for the course of events. Thus, she decides to act and retrieve as much information as possible about this criminal organisation. She succeeds in being hired as a house-parlour maid at Rita's house – another member of Mr Brown's criminal gang – in order to spy on her and discover where Tommy is. The first demonstration of Tuppence's personality and adventurous spirit arrives when, in an attempt to stop Rita who is about to escape, she manages to steal her gun, symbol of masculine power, and convince her to cooperate. The young woman does not allow herself to be intimidated by Rita's threats, on the contrary, she manages to put her completely out of the way before Julius and Sir James arrive. Her victory over Rita guarantees her the esteem and respect of the two men, both amazed by the courage shown by the young woman. Sir James congratulates her, «Well done Miss Tuppence» (SA, p. 306), whereas Julius tells her «You're so darned plucky» (SA, p. 324). Likewise, Mr Carter shows sentiments of esteem and admiration for Tuppence, a woman with «intuition» and «less common sense» than Tommy, who «worries things out slowly» (SA, p. 388-389).

Tuppence's self-reliance questions and mocks the masculine hero. When she is captured by the villains, Julius imagines her as a Victorian heroine waiting to be rescued by the brave hero: «it gets to my goat to think of that innocent young girl in danger! » (SA, p. 358). Tommy, who knows Tuppence's determination, tries to console him: «I've great faith in Tuppence» (SA, p. 358). The final solution proves to be the result of both their actions and intuitions as they «make a pretty pair working together. Pace and stamina» (SA, p. 389). In a novel mainly inhabited by masculine figures strolling around the city of London, an urban space traditionally associated with men, Tuppence never renounces her freedom although in the limits that society imposes on women. She always tries to exploit those limits to her advantage. When in search for information, she enters domestic service, a choice that does not raise any suspicion as with the interwar depression combined with the return of soldiers – who regained their pre-war occupations – numerous women went back into the domestic service sector.

At the beginning of the novel Tuppence is depicted as a modern woman with a business-like attitude, who disregards sentimental views of romance and wants to marry for money. At the end, marriage arrives, but she does not have to abandon her original idea. Tommy proposes, not before having been designated as his wealthy uncle's only heir. Tuppence will marry him, as she believes that marriage is «a sport» (SA, p. 444) that will bring on more adventures. She redefines marriage «as an activity in which one voluntarily engages for pleasure and excitement» (Hoffman 2016, p. 104), rather than the more common constructions: «a haven, a refuge, and a crowning glory, and a state of bondage» (SA, p. 444). Seven years later, in *Partners in Crime* (1929), the reader finds Tuppence complaining about the dullness of the new life, devoted to housekeeping: «Twenty minutes' work after breakfast every morning keeps the flat going to perfection» (PIC, p. 8). Domestic life reveals itself unbearable for Tuppence, who is dissatisfied with the fairy tale happy ending. «So, Tommy and Tuppence were married [...] and lived happily ever afterwards. It is extraordinary [...] how different everything always is from what you think it is going to be» (PIC, 7).

The opportunity to break the monotonous routine arrives from the British Intelligence that needs the couple to trap a spy. Taking inspiration from «every detective novel that has been published in the last ten years» (PIC, p. 15), they take on the names of various fictional detectives and their sidekicks, including Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson and Christie's own Hercule Poirot and Captain Hastings. The stories seem to

parody the eccentricities and methods of those other fictional detectives, thus emphasising the comic spirit of their adventures that Bargainnier regards as the couple's peculiar feature. Although Tommy assumes, in this new business, the position of the private detective with Tuppence as his secretary, it is merely a deceiving masquerade as they still work on equal terms and exchange the roles of detective and sidekick. «In the adjoining room was Tuppence, a typewriter, the necessary tables and chairs of an inferior type to those in the room of the great Chief, and a gas ring for making tea» (PIC, p. 14). Apparently, Christie seems to reinforce the status quo that encouraged male supremacy by placing Tuppence in a marginal position, also from a spatial point of view, as the room she is confined in looks like a storage space. However, by having Tuppence solve the mystery, Christie transgresses the dominant social conventions. Similarly, the sarcastic reference to Tommy as the «great Chief» mocks the general opinion about men's superiority. In this way, as Makinen argues, the novel «destabili[ses] the dominance and subservience of [...] traditional constructions» (Makinen 2006, p. 34), where men have the leading role and women are the subordinate assistants. This masquerade sheds a light on those gender roles that characterise the workplace, as Hoffman argues (Hoffman 2016, p. 103), where men are leaders and women their subordinate.

In all the Beresford novels and short stories Tuppence continuously questions gender roles and women's place in the domestic sphere. She demonstrates that motherhood should not be perceived as a woman's only occupation. In this respect, Gill Plain emphasises that Christie's interwar fiction is concerned with questioning the relationship between domestic and public sphere (Plain 2014, p. 47). She states that Christie was influenced by the discourses about female agency of the interwar period. In her fiction «[w]omen can do, and they do» (Plain 2014, p. 47). In *The Secret Adversary*, Tuppence criticises romantic views about marriages and domestic life and disagrees with her father's Victorian conception of married life. In *Partners in Crime* she feels out of place within the static domestic sphere. She craves for change and action, since the days devoted to housework never seem to pass. In *N or M?* Tuppence is annoyed again by the inactivity in which domestic life confines her. She calls herself «a poor, pushing, tiresome, middle-aged woman who won't sit at home quietly and knit as she ought to do» (NM, p. 10). Feeling discriminated by both her status as a woman and her age, Tuppence refuses, once more, to stay at home and perform those traditional feminine domestic crafts as knitting and sewing. When Tommy is asked to resume his old duties in hunting down

spies, Tuppence is left behind by the British Intelligence. She, however, eavesdrops the mission and precedes Tommy arriving before him at the resort hotel where the investigation should be conducted. In *By the Pricking of my Thumbs*, Tuppence hopes that an unexpected adventure can bright up the tedious life after retirement. As the most energetic and resolute partner within the couple, Tuppence longs for action. It is Tuppence who solves the riddle at the heart of the novel, thus showing that maternity and professional work are not mutually exclusive. In *Postern of Fate*, the last Beresford novel, the couple has just bought a new house. While Tuppence is arranging books on the shelves, she hopes to break the monotony of domestic life and find, among their pages, «something startling, surprising. Something that'll make all the difference to our lives» (POF, p. 9). Her search proves to be successful as she finds a coded message in an old book left behind by the previous occupants. The message about a long-buried secret gives her the opportunity to resume her career and do what she does best.

What emerges from their adventures is Tuppence's aversion for boredom and inactivity. The domestic sphere has traditionally been associated with stasis, while the public space, usually man-oriented, has been related to motion and action. Tuppence crosses and re-crosses the boundaries between the two – a traditionally masculine freedom – personifying, as Makinen argues, «the new-found freedoms and confidence many young women experienced in the 1920s» (Makinen 2006, p. 38). Tuppence embodies the social and economic independence that various women were experiencing during and after the years of the Great War, when they were allowed a greater mobility and showed self-confidence. As Light argues in *Forever England*, the inter-war years marked «for many women their entry into modernity, […] a time when older forms of relationship and intimate behaviour were being recast and when even the most traditional of attitudes took new form» (Light 1991, p. 10). Tuppence provides, to quote Hoffman, «a model of femininity that attempts to reconcile new opportunities for career women with a fulfilling romantic relationship and a domestic life» (Hoffman 2016, p. 8). At the end of *Partners in Crime* Tuppence announces that she is about to start a new and unique adventure that has nothing to do with detective business, that, for now, she should give up. Tommy assumes that her decision depends on the fear that the last case aroused in her. Tuppence, instead, shouts that with a baby on the way parenthood will prove to be a new challenge: «I've got something better to do [...] Something ever so much more exciting ...I'm talking [...] of Our Baby» (PIC, p. 223). Susan Rowland argues

«Tuppence's vigorous personality allows the novel to represent pregnancy as a continuum of self-fulfilling adventures within traditional feminine domesticity» (Rowland 2001, p. 158). The collection ends with the re-establishment of the conventional family pattern, with maternity believed to be the natural destiny of a married couple. Christie, as Rowland argues, allows female self-expression, "but finally do[es] not trouble conventional structures" (Rowland 2001, p. 158). However, it is a reassuring joyful conclusion that is not meant to last long. At the incipit of the following novel *N or M?*, the reader finds Tuppence missing the excitement of spy-hunting days. The duo, therefore, lives a conventional life «only in the spaces in between novels», as Gillian Gill argues (Gill 1990, p. 73).

The *fil rouge* that unites the four Beresford novels and the short stories is Tuppence's unwillingness to give up, for good, her role as the initiator of every adventure. For several critics, Tuppence's role evolves but she never renounces her self-determination. For Maida and Spornick, she rises above the role of «Mrs Tommy» to become more of an individual (Maida & Spornick 1982, p. 139). For Bargainnier instead, the chronological aging of the couple displays a greater discrepancy between the two, with Tommy becoming «more and more recessive, functioning principally as a scold to Tuppence, while she takes the active role» (Bargainnier 1980, p. 85). Despite the divergence between them, they barely argue, and when they do, it is for Tuppence's impulsive personality. When her exuberance puts her into danger, Tommy tries in vain to persuade her from taking other imprudent decisions.

Although they are often shadowed by Christie's most famous creations Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple, with Tommy and Tuppence's novels Christie renegotiates her idea of marriage, «away from the Victorian/Edwardian sentimentality that viewed women's lives as solely defined within the terrain of domesticity and emotions» (Makinen 2006, p. 62). Marriage is 'a joint venture' where traditional gender roles are destabilised and women's association with the domestic sphere is questioned and parodied. Tuppence defends her right to be considered an equal partner both in marriage and in life in a society that advocated different roles for men and women. The masculine attributes she is accorded amplify Tommy's feminised masculinity. At the beginning of *The Secret Adversary*, he makes his debut as a war hero, a wounded soldier who fought for the protection of the nation. He embodies the pre-war idealised model of masculinity that had been disseminated throughout the interwar years, mainly with the purpose to

drive men to enlist. However, as the story develops, Tommy's ordinariness emphasises his flaws and his vulnerability. When the first dangerous case arrives, he proves to be unfit for the role of the hero. He infiltrates, disguising himself as a gangster, a crime syndicate whom he believes is holding Jane Finn captive. He ends up kidnapped and manages to escape with Jane Finn's help. The roles are reversed: the imprisoned heroine saves the hero who should have been her saviour. Tommy's inadequacy to be the male hero is compensated by Tuppence's vigorous personality. She takes part in the adventures with great physical courage, showing determination and eagerness. His success is only made possible by co-operation with Tuppence. Without her, Tommy puts his life in danger – he ends up kidnapped – and fails to perform the role of the secret agent. The constant presence of the female partner implies that detective literature is now dealing with a different kind of hero, more humanised than the traditional one.

Conclusions

The aftermath of the Great War witnessed a change in gender norms and roles. Fiction changed too in response to changing social norms. Detective fiction reacted to those social and historical changes in a comic and often light mode. In particular, female authorship characterised the new form of detective novel that became popular in the interwar epoch. The new form gave voice to a feminised masculinity that collides with the idea of manhood that the war emphasised and destroyed. Among the protagonists of the interwar detective novel, a feminised detective hero comes forward together with the figure of the courageous intrepid flapper heroine, shaped in opposition to the Victorian ideal of woman.

Among Christie's intrepid young adventurers, Tuppence is the most popular and the only one who appears in four novels and one short-story collections. She embodies the flapper heroine that comes forward in the aftermath of the Great War, a figure that displays self-reliance, financial independence and courage. Tuppence is outspoken, resolute and meets physical danger. She distinguishes herself as a woman that balances her private life with professional responsibilities. She moves between the public and the private spaces using the limits society imposes on women to her advantage. Although Christie does not make her the leading detective of the adventures, Tuppence's relationship with Tommy is based on equality and the final solutions are the result of an equal partition of roles.

Through the figure of Tuppence Christie gives voice to the changes occurring in post-war Britain regarding gender roles. Tuppence and Tommy's adventures cover a period of fifty years in British social history, thus their fiction witnesses how gender roles changed and evolved from the 1920s to the 1970s. Their joint venture becomes, for Christie, an opportunity to encourage a discussion on equal partnership outside and within the matrimonial field. Christie's works «challenge the traditional views of the feminine role within marriage» (Makinen 2006, p. 114). She shapes modern women, including Tuppence, who drive cars – symbol of mobility – smoke cigarettes and stroll around public spaces without feeling out of place. Those women believe in partnerships based on mutual support and respect.

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