CHAPTER FOUR

GENDER CONSTRUCTS:
THE PORTRAYAL OF GENDER ROLES IN THE WRITING OF BLYTON AND CHRISTIE

> The position of women, over the years, has definitely changed for the worse. We women have behaved like mugs. We have clamoured to be allowed to work as men work. Men, not being fools, have taken kindly to the idea. Why support a wife? What's wrong with a wife supporting herself? She wants to do it. By Golly, she can go on doing it!
>
> It seems sad that having established ourselves so cleverly as the 'weaker sex', we should now be broadly on a par with the women of primitive tribes who toil in the fields all day, walk miles to gather camelthorn for fuel, and on trek carry all the pots, pans and household equipment in their heads, whilst the gorgeous, ornamental male sweeps on ahead, unburdened save for one lethal weapon to defend his women.
>
> You've got to hand it to the Victorian women; they got their menfolk where they wanted them. They established their frailty, delicacy, sensibility – the constant need of being protected and cherished. Did they lead miserable, servile lives, downtrodden and oppressed? Such is not my recollection of them. All my grandmothers' friends seem to me in retrospect singularly resilient and almost invariably successful in getting their own way. They were tough, self-willed, and remarkably well-read and well-informed.
>
> Agatha Christie *An Autobiography*

1 INTRODUCTION

As I have pointed out in Chapter One of this study, dominant discourses often manifest in asymmetrical power relations between individuals in which one individual is dominated or oppressed by the other. We have seen that both Agatha Christie and Enid Blyton were successful women writers in a society wherein which the prevailing body of beliefs promoted patriarchal heteronormative discourses in which gender stereotyping defined the role and acceptable social and cultural behaviour of women. In England in the early twentieth century these systems of thought advocated that women should be passive creatures and that they should focus on domestic roles and activities such as raising children and managing the

household rather than following a career such as writing novels. Laura Barton remarks that "[a]s children, we soon learned, it was different for boys" (2007:31) and that girls and women were 'other', not male. Before going any further I think it is useful for my discussion to define a few key terms relevant to this chapter, and to begin by noting that Smith highlights the need for us "to be aware of the problems related to the use of the terms 'sex' and 'gender' as though they are interchangeable" (2009:1) when we discuss gender roles and constructs. She goes on to define sex as "the bodily properties, qualities or parts that identify a person as being either male or female" (Smith 2009:1). These bodily properties include genital organs and hormones. Gender,

> is a social construct…. It refers to the dominant norms and expectations that a society or group has of girls and boys, women and men. These norms and expectations, which vary across societies and groups, include ideas about what counts as 'typically feminine' behaviour for girls and women and what counts as 'typically masculine' behaviour for boys and men. In addition to these norms and expectations about behaviour, society decides the appropriate or 'proper' characteristics and abilities of girls and women on the one hand, and boys and men on the other. In other words, gender is about the commonly shared expectations about the appearance, abilities, characteristics, attitudes, needs and desires, and the behaviour, in different situations, of women and men. Religion, cultural, educational and political institutions, families, schools, the workplace, the media, advertising and so on all contribute to the construction of gender. The roles and activities of girls and women, and men and boys, their responsibilities, the amount of power they have – politically, socially and economically – are all influenced by these gendered norms and expectations.
>
> (Smith 2009:2)

Following from Smith's definition of gender, femininity refers to the accepted and proper social behaviour expected of girls and women, while masculinity refers to the appropriate social behaviour accepted among boys and men. Heteronormativity is the term used to describe the presumption that people fulfil predetermined complementary gender roles in a society in which heterosexuality, the experience of attraction primarily to persons of the opposite sex, is the norm. Heteronormativity can be linked to the concept of the gender binary which delineates gender roles as either distinctly masculine or feminine; women are allocated

domestic tasks while men fill leadership positions. Patriarchy is a social structure in which the father or eldest male is head of the household and has authority over women and children. In this chapter I seek to explore the complex relationship of Enid Blyton and Agatha Christie to the dominant heteronormative discourse of their time. However, in the discussions that follow, it is evident that Blyton and Christie appear to both endorse and reinforce some of the dominant discourses of the time, while simultaneously offering opposition to these discourses and presenting alternative discourses.

Blyton and Christie's horizons of expectation, and thus their ways of thinking about gender roles in society, were shaped by the dominant discourses of their society. On the one hand, they would have assimilated and internalised the norms of the dominant group in society that advocated different roles for men and women, boys and girls. The dominant perspectives of the time in which Blyton and Christie lived and wrote reinforce the separation of women from men in a male-dominated society; women are regarded as 'other' and defined by their relationships with men as wives and mothers. Blyton and Christie still held onto some of the more conservative discourses of the early twentieth century that defined gender roles. The strict norms of the nineteenth century concerning acceptable behaviour for women remained widespread in the early twentieth century and many of them remain common even today. However, on the other hand, as I mentioned in Chapter One of this study, an individual's horizon is not fixed, it is constantly changing as a result of the influences of emergent and alternative discourses. Thus Blyton and Christie would also have been influenced by emergent and alternative discourses relating to female agency and gender equality. Plain believes that "the assumption underlying [Christie's] interwar fiction is one of female agency. Women can do, and they do" (2001:47). Christie and Blyton do not always restrict the behaviour of the female characters to ensure that they conform to the feminine gender roles encoded in the

dominant discourses of gender prevalent at the time. On occasion, Blyton and Christie raise feminist questions about power, gender and the social roles of women, as well as female participation in society. Thus, in their writing Christie and Blyton explore some aspects of "social conventions and morals, and normalizing concepts of home and heterosexual families" (Mezei 2007:104). In this chapter, I consider the often contradictory presentation of gender roles in the writing of Blyton and Christie and examine how they present femininity and masculinity and "covertly query power and gender relations while simultaneously upholding the status quo" (Mezei 2007:104).

In relation to the portrayal of emergent discourses in the writing of Blyton and Christie in terms of their representation of gender roles in their writing, it is important to bear in mind that "not all women writers are feminist writers" (Cranny-Francis 1990:1). According to Cranny-Francis, the term feminist fiction refers to "genre fiction written from a self consciously feminist perspective, consciously encoding an ideology which is in direct opposition to the dominant gender ideology of Western society, patriarchal ideology" (1990:1). In relation to this definition, the writing of Blyton and Christie cannot be described as feminist fiction. Nonetheless, as discussed in Chapter Two of this study, it is important to bear in mind that their decisions reflect some of the emergent discourses around female independence in the early twentieth century: Enid Blyton and Agatha Christie were "the two richest women writers" of their time (Greenfield 1998:81), they were successful career women of independent means, and they both divorced their first husbands at a time when divorce was considered shameful. It is possible to argue that Christie even thought of herself as a feminist. As I said in Chapter Two of this study, it is widely believed that the character of Mrs Oliver is Christie's 'alter ego'. In *Cards on the Table* Christie refers to Mrs Oliver as "a hot-headed feminist"

(Christie [1936] 1963:14). Later in the same novel, when the men play a game of bridge against the women, Christie has Mrs Oliver remark:

> "Mind you win," said Mrs Oliver, her feminist feelings rising. "Show the men they can't have it all their own way".
>
> (Christie [1936] 1963:21)

Christie might well have been using the character of Mrs Oliver as a platform to express her own opinions about gender roles in society.

2 GENDER AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

Gender, as a social construct, plays a role in classifying and defining individuals and underpins a particular way of thinking about an individual's roles in society. In a patriarchal and heteronormative society girls and women, boys and men are expected to fill specific gender-appropriate roles – girls and women fill a more submissive role and participate in domestic and home-based activities, while men and boys dominate, and fill the role of the authority figure responsible for maintaining control. As discussed earlier in this study, to define is to control. The dominant discourse seeks to control and regulate individuals by defining the socially and culturally acceptable and appropriate behaviour of males and females.

It is also important to bear in mind that definitions of gender influence the horizons of expectation of individuals in a society: the social norms and conventions, as determined by the dominant discourse, expect men and women to behave in certain ways. Individuals internalise current social conventions about gender behaviour as determined by the dominant discourses of their society and conform to what is considered 'normal' behaviour. Institutions such as religion, education, and the family promote consensual control by reinforcing the values and practices of the dominant discourse with regard to dominant perceptions and conventions of gender, and with a view to encouraging social order and conformity in line with these. In turn, the practices of sexist discourse become thought of as normal behaviour. Klein believes that "[i]n such a world view, criminals and women are put in their proper, secondary places"(1995:1).

Discussions of gender and sexism, including this chapter, must take into consideration the social context as well as the readers' viewpoint on gender and sexism in society. Rudd believes that, as a result of dominant discourses about appropriate gender behaviour, child readers have "gender expectations" (2000:120) – their horizons of expectation are moulded by the dominant discourse and ways of being valued by society. As such, they expect to see gender-specific behaviour reflected in the books they read.

Blyton appears to endorse and reflect socially acceptable gender stereotypes of the time in her choice of a male leader, Julian, in the *Famous Five* series. In addition, as I have already observed, she portrays mothers in a loving and nurturing domestic role. In Blyton's *Famous Five* books there are several situations in which the female characters stay behind, fulfilling the gender expectation that girls should be protected from danger, while the male characters become involved in the more 'dangerous' activities in the story. In *Five Go off to Camp* the boys prevent George from joining them on excursions to the dangerous railway yard at night to watch for spook-trains because she is a girl. However, when the children's friend Jock, a boy, asks if they will be going to the railway yard, Julian replies:

> "We might go," said Julian. "We'll take you with us, if we do. But the girls aren't to come."
>
> (Blyton [1948] 1967:74)

In *Five Go Down to the Sea* the girls stay at home, where it is safe, when the boys go with Mr Penruthlan to capture the villains.

> "Not the girls," [Mr Penruthlan] said….
> "I'll keep the girls here with me," said Mrs Penruthlan.
>
> (Blyton [1953] 1969:172)

These examples illustrate the marginal position of women and girls in a society dominated by men and boys. Blyton's portrayal of gender relations appears to promote what was thought appropriate, generally speaking, at the time. According to Maureen Reddy "[l]iterature reflects

reality, and since most real-life detectives are men it is only natural that the detective story reflects this situation" (Reddy, in Bergland 2000:138). This reflection of reality is particularly evident in Christie's portrayal of the patriarchal heteronormative roles filled by the detecting couple Tommy and Tuppence Beresford. When they go under cover to run The International Detective Agency in the short story *A Fairy in the Flat* Tommy fills the role of the detective, while Tuppence fills the inferior role of his "confidential secretary" (Christie [1924] 2008a:12). This secondary status afforded to Tuppence is apparent in Christie's description of Tuppence's office:

> 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.
>
> (Christie [1924] 2008a:8)

This discrepancy in their roles would have been entirely appropriate in terms of the gender expectations at the time of writing. Hence, Christie appears to reinforce the status quo which promoted male dominance by placing Tuppence in a perceived secondary position. However, by having Tuppence actually solve the mystery, thereby placing her in a position of power, Christie simultaneously resists the dominant discourse. In addition, Christie's sarcastic reference to Tommy as the "great Chief" also undermines the widespread perception of the time that men were superior. When we consider the reflection of these apparently contradictory discourses in Christie's writing, it is important to bear in mind that she wrote to earn money. It would not have been practical nor would it have been very sensible for her to overtly challenge the gender role expectations of her readers whose horizons were shaped by the dominant discourse of the society in which they operated. Doing so might have alienated readers and reduced sales of her books.

2.1 Discourses of the time: stereotypes about the roles of men and women

In the first half of the twentieth century women were encouraged to conform to the traditional family roles of wife and mother, to find happiness in marriage and to bear children (Miles 2001:102). These values would have been assimilated by both Christie and Blyton, and would have shaped their horizons of expectation. At the same time, social changes led to an increase in literacy and education among women. The twentieth century also brought greater awareness of women's social issues which contributed to the establishment of the Women's Social and Political Union on 3 October 1903 by Emmeline Pankhurst – members later became known as suffragettes. Women in Britain achieved voting equality on 2 July 1928. However, in spite of greater gender awareness and the social changes in the first half of the twentieth century, a number of strict conservative discourses about appropriate gender behaviour remained dominant. This illustrates my earlier recognition of the ways in which different discourses – dominant, oppositional or alternative, and emergent – operating in society overlap and how the balance between and among these discourses is constantly fluctuating.

During the First World War women were called on to work and take on jobs outside the home in opposition to the dominant discourse that dictated against this, and in opposition to the notion that a woman earning an income and gaining financial independence and security was an overturning of the natural order of things. As a result,

> British women's attitudes about working began to change. Young middle-class women felt themselves entitled to work; working-class women who had done men's work questioned female subordination on the job; and the number of women in trade unions rose.
>
> (Rowbothham, in Klein 1995: 96)

Women became more emancipated. However, regardless of these changes, dominant social conventions and patterns of behaviour that encouraged subordinate female behaviour

continued to dominate society in the years after the war. Klein describes the period after the First World War in Britain as "a time of antifeminism" (1995:97). "[P]ublic opinion was hostile to women workers who were keeping men's jobs instead of keeping house; they were seen as leeches and bloodsuckers for wanting decent wages and not being willing to go back to domestic work" (Klein 1995:96-97).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century large patriarchal and hierarchical families, in which traditional roles for men and women were clearly defined, were a middle class norm. There is a clear distinction between stories written for girls with a domestic and family setting – such as *Little Women* (1868) and *Good Wives* (1869) by Louisa May Alcott, *Lorna Doone* (1869) by Richard Doddridge Blackmore, and Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) – and heroic adventure stories that seemingly encourage bravery, independence, and physical strength in boys including Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer* (1876), *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) by Rider Haggard, works by Rudyard Kipling such as *The Jungle Book* (1894) and *Kim* (1901), and stories by Captain W.E. Johns featuring Biggles, a teenage fighter pilot in the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) during World War I, which were first published in 1932. Laura Barton recalls the books she read when she was a child and that the pages of stories for girls

> were riddled with ladies who swooned, and simpering boarding-school girls who dreamed of ponies, while on television women were always assistants, love interests or girls who get the collywobbles at the sight of a ghost or a spider. Boys had heroics and derring-do; girls had niceness.
>
> (2007:31)

Books provided a platform for promotion of patriarchal hegemony and those texts published for children during the late 1800s and the early 1900s reinforce "definite male and female roles" (Norton 1983:63).

Patriarchal expectations of women were often based on their being 'pure' and 'decent' and these expectations had an impact on perceptions about a woman's reputation. The importance of a woman's reputation, necessary to making a good marriage, is emphasised by Christie when she has Mrs Ackroyd comment that it is fortunate that Flora's engagement to Ralph Paton was never formally announced because an engagement to a man with a dubious reputation would cast a shadow over her own reputation, and thus affect her chances of making a 'good' marriage to someone else:

> "I must say," [Mrs Ackroyd] observed in a plaintive voice, "that Ralph's absence is most peculiar – most peculiar indeed. Not to come forward at such a time. It looks, you know, as though there were something *behind* it. I can't help thinking, Flora dear, that it was a very fortunate thing your engagement was never formally announced."
>
> (Christie [1926] 1974:115)

Through marriage women gained a feeling of 'power' – married women were far more respected than unmarried women of similar age because they were conforming to the status quo. A refusal to marry was often regarded as a sign of independence in a society concerned with keeping women in a submissive position. And, of course, the status and/or class of the men they married would have also been significant: a man in an influential position in society would transfer this influence to his wife, thus elevating her social standing. In *The Murder at the Vicarage,* when asked why she married the vicar, Christie has Griselda respond: "[i]t made me feel so powerful" (Christie [1930] 1972:9).

Within married life, the role of the woman was defined by a domestic framework – she was responsible for managing the servants and the household, preparing food, teaching, nursing, and midwifery. Blyton reinforces this role in her *Famous Five* adventures. She has Aunt Fanny tell Anne and George, the girls, to help her make the sandwiches: "[y]ou and Anne can help to make the sandwiches" (Blyton [1942] 1967:50) while the boys are sent to pick plums

in the garden and buy some bottles of lemonade or ginger beer. A number of similar examples can be found throughout the *Famous Five* series. In *Five Go off in a Caravan* we hear:

> "You get the breakfast, Anne and George, and Dick and I will catch the horses and put them in the caravan shafts," said Julian.
>
> (Blyton [1946] 1967:64)

Similarly, in *Five on Kirrin Island Again* "[t]he girls washed up the tea things, and cleared away neatly" (Blyton [1947] 1967:120).

In the early twentieth century, sex before marriage and the birth of children out of wedlock was also considered scandalous. In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* it is revealed that Miss Russell, the housekeeper, has a son who was born out of wedlock.

> "Mademoiselle," said Poirot, interrupting her, "in this matter I must have the whole truth. What you tell us need never go beyond these four walls. Dr. Sheppard will be discreet, and so shall I. See, I will help you. This Charles Kent, he is your son, is he not?"
> She nodded. The colour had flamed into her cheeks.
> "No one has ever known. It was long ago – long ago – down in Kent. I was not married…."
>
> (Christie [1926] 1974:180)

Christie emphasises Miss Russell's shame by pointing out her blush when the truth is revealed. Christie goes on to reveal that while Miss Russell supported her son financially, she "never told him that [she] was his mother" (Christie [1926] 1974:180) in an effort to avoid the shame associated with having – or, in this case, being – an illegitimate child. Similarly, divorce was also still considered taboo: even in the 1940s "despite the relaxation in moral attitudes which life in wartime was to bring, divorce was still widely regarded as shocking, an occasion for scandal" (Druce 1992:14). As I noted in Chapter Two, Christie highlights this attitude in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* when she reminds her readers that "[s]candal between husband and wife is a dreadful thing" (Christie [1920] 1969:45).

In *The Murder at the Vicarage* Christie illustrates what was considered to be socially unacceptable behaviour for an unmarried woman at the time. Christie portrays the current gender expectations by having Mrs Price Ridely point out that it is "[n]ot quite nice" (Christie [1930] 1972:14) that Lettice is posing for a painting in her bathing dress. Similarly, we hear Miss Wetherby comment in a horrified tone that it is inappropriate for an unmarried woman, Miss Cram, to be a secretary to Dr Stone, an unmarried man.

> Miss Wetherby said tersely: "No nice girl would do it," and shut her thin lips disapprovingly.
> "Do what?" I inquired.
> "Be a secretary to an unmarried man," said Miss Wetherby in a horrified tone.
> "Oh! My dear," said Miss Marple. "*I* think married ones are the worst. Remember poor Millie Carter."
> "Married men living apart from their wives are, of course, notorious," said Miss Wetherby.
> "And even some of the ones living with their wives," murmured Miss Marple. "I remember–"
> I interrupted these unsavoury reminiscences.
> "But surely," I said, "in these days a girl can take a post in the same way a man does."
> "To come away to the country? And stay in the same hotel?" said Mrs Price Ridely in a severe voice.
> Miss Wetherby murmured to Miss Marple in a low voice.
> "And all the rooms on the same floor…"
>
> (Christie [1930] 1972:12-13)

However, Christie also counters these socially acceptable ways of thinking by having the vicar remark that, surely, "in these days a girl can take a post in the same way a man does" (Christie [1930] 1972:13). This presents evidence of Christie's opposition to the dominant discourse that encouraged women to stay at home while men went out and worked. It is possible to argue that by having the vicar refer to the women's "unsavoury reminiscences" (Christie [1930] 1972:13), Christie is in fact criticising the promotion of the dominant discourse by these stereotypical rural English women.

In the *Famous Five* stories Blyton portrays asymmetrical power relations and emphasises the 'dependence' of female children by highlighting the physical 'weakness' of female children and their need to be protected by males. In *Five Go to Smuggler's Top* Blyton reinforces the protective role of the boys:

> [Julian] wished the girls were not there.
> "Now listen," he said. "George, you go and sleep with Anne and Marybelle next door. Lock your door and keep the light on. Dick and I will sleep here, in Sooty's old room, also with the light on, so you'll know we are quite nearby."
> It was comforting to know that the boys were so near.
>
> (Blyton [1945] 1967:138)

In a further manifestation of their alleged weakness, women and girls often cry and need to be comforted by the men and boys,

> "Mrs Lenoir was now crying quietly, with Marybelle sobbing beside her. Mr Lenoir put an arm around his wife and kissed Marybelle, suddenly appearing very much nicer than he had ever seemed before."
>
> (Blyton [1945] 1967:143)

As a result of the belief that women are weaker and require protection, they are also treated differently. Different punishment is given to boys from that meted out to girls.

> "I must apologize for my stepfather," said Sooty. "He has such a terrible temper. He wouldn't have punished you like this if he had thought you were a girl. But he keeps thinking you're a boy."
>
> (Blyton [1945] 1967:117)

Even the villains in Blyton's writing treat boys and girls differently.

> "You stay up there with him, then," he said. "And the girl can stay with you, holding the dog. But the other boy can come out here."
> He thought that George was a boy. George didn't mind. She liked people to think she was a boy. She answered at once. … But Julian was not going to let George be hurt. She might like to think of herself as a boy, but he wasn't going to let her be treated like one.
>
> (Blyton [1946] 1967:171-172)

These examples illustrate how Blyton has the characters monitor and regulate their own behaviour in line with the dominant socially acceptable behaviour and opinions of the time regarding the appropriately different treatment of girls and women, and men and boys. Blyton

even has George demonstrate acceptance of Julian's position of authority over her when she begs to accompany the boys:

> "Oh, let me come too," begged George.
> "No," said Julian. "Certainly not. This is rather a dangerous adventure, and Mr. Barling is a bad and dangerous man. You and Marybelle are certainly not to come, I'll take Dick."
>
> (Blyton [1945] 1967:146)

When it comes to committing murder, Christie argues that women choose less 'masculine' means to kill; "women never like fiddling about with firearms. Arsenic's more in their line" (Christie [1930] 1972:76). This reflects Christie's assimilation of the stereotype that guns are masculine, while poison is feminine. In this way, girls and women are portrayed as the 'weaker' sex. And of course, attractive women, who epitomise the feminine ideal, are less likely to commit murder: "Surely no woman as beautiful as Mary Cavendish could be a murderess" (Christie [1920] 1969:129).

While social gender stereotyping dictates appropriate social and cultural behaviour for women, it also delineates the acceptable role of men in society. The patriarchal heteronormative discourse in England in the early twentieth century advocated that men hold power over women and that they should exhibit masculine characteristics and behaviour – they should exercise control and make decisions, and they should be brave, adventurous and independent. These ways of thinking became entrenched and were regarded as normal by society.

Within the domestic environment portrayed by Blyton, men play the role of the decision-maker, and women do not make decisions without first consulting their husbands. When the

children in *Five Go off in a Caravan* ask if they may go on a holiday in a caravan, Blyton displays a patriarchal relationship between the husband and wife by having Mother respond:

> "I'll have to talk it over with Daddy," said Mother. "Now, don't look so disappointed – I can't decide a thing like this all by myself in a hurry."
>
> (Blyton [1946] 1967:19)

After consultation with her husband Mother lets the children know:

> "Yes, we've talked it over," she said. "And Daddy says he doesn't see why you shouldn't have a caravan holiday."

That Blyton has Mother tell the children that "Daddy says" (Blyton [1946] 1967:19) creates the impression that Mother was not part of the decision-making process and this reinforces her submissive role and her lack of decision-making power or control. In addition, this is an example of hegemony in action because Blyton portrays the mother as accepting of her submissive role; the mother consents to her subordinate position.

Similarly, in *Five Go to Smuggler's Top* when a tree falls on Kirrin Cottage, Uncle Quentin takes control of the situation:

> "*I'm* seeing to things, Mrs Daly," said Uncle Quentin. "My wife has had a great shock. She is not fit to see to things herself."
>
> (Blyton [1945] 1967:23)

As we have seen, Blyton also portrays the dominant patriarchal discourse of the time by having Julian, the eldest male child take responsibility in a number of situations in the *Famous Five* tales. These extracts demonstrate this.

> Julian went as usual to ask permission to camp, and Dick went with him, leaving the two girls to prepare a meal.
>
> (Blyton [1946] 1967:42)

> "You will be in complete charge, you understand, Julian," said the boy's father. "You are old enough now to be really responsible. The others must realize that you are in charge and they must do as you say."
> "Yes, sir," said Julian, feeling proud. "I'll see to things all right."
>
> (Blyton [1946] 1967:20)

The established system of thought at the time expected men and boys to behave in a so-called masculine manner. This includes not showing a 'feminine' emotion like sadness or misery. In *The Ship of Adventure*, one of Blyton's books from the *Adventure* series, she portrays the children as scornful of Lucian who cries (Blyton [1950] 2000:82). Similarly, in *Five on Kirrin Island Again,* Blyton reiterates the widespread opinion of the time that boys should behave in a masculine manner by having Martin's 'father' react with contempt about Martin's drawing of pictures of flowers, trees, birds and butterflies.

> They were queer pictures for a boy to draw, for they were of flowers and trees, birds and butterflies – all drawn and coloured most perfectly, every detail put in lovingly. Julian looked at them in surprise. This boy was certainly gifted. Why, these drawings were as good as any he had ever seen in exhibitions! He picked a few up and took them to the window.
> "Do you mean to say your father doesn't think these are good – doesn't think it's worth while to let you train as an artist?" she said, in surprise.
> "He hates my pictures," said Martin, bitterly. "I ran away from school, and went to art-school to train – but he found me and forbade me to think of drawing any more. He thinks it's a weak, feeble thing for a man to do. So I only do it in secret now."
> (Blyton [1947] 1967:116)

That such pictures were widely regarded as inappropriate gender behaviour for a boy is emphasised by Martin's statement that his father thinks that drawing is a "weak, feeble thing for a man to do" (Blyton [1947] 1967:116). The implication is that men who draw are not masculine; rather they are effeminate and perhaps even homosexual. However, to a certain extent Blyton subverts this narrow-minded thinking by having the children endorse Martin's drawing of such pictures by complimenting him on them. In this way, Blyton is offering an alternative discourse to what the dominant discourse promotes as appropriate behaviour for boys.

To a certain extent Christie's Hercule Poirot subverts gender role expectations by behaving in a "stereotypically 'feminine'" (Smith 2002:29) way. He is described as "a great dandy" (Christie [1920] 1969:11), someone overly concerned with the elegance of his appearance –

he arranges "his moustache with exquisite care" (Christie [1920] 1969:35) and "[t]he neatness of his attire was almost incredible; I believe a speck of dust would have caused him more pain than a bullet wound" (Christie [1920] 1969:21). He is even mistaken for a retired "hairdresser", not a typically masculine career and, therefore, one often stereotypically associated with homosexuals, by Dr Sheppard in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (Christie [1926] 1974:19&23). In the short story *The Tragedy at Marsdon Manor"* Christie gives Poirot given feminine characteristics when she has Hastings remark that "Lady Yardly, aptly ministered to by Poirot, who is as good as a woman in these matters, was sufficiently recovered to be able to tell her story" (Christie [1924] 1958a:23). Not only is Poirot "relatively unmasculine" (Smith 2002:29) in his behaviour, but he is also shorter than the average male "hardly more than five feet four inches" (Christie [1920] 1969:21). Many of these descriptions hint at the possibility that Poirot may be homosexual. However, Hart argues against this and claims that "[t]here is a hint on the last page of *The Big Four* that Poirot was trying to summon up courage to propose marriage to the Countess" (1990:190). In the closing paragraph of *The Big Four* we hear Poirot comment: "I might even marry and arrange myself!" (Christie [1927]1994:221). However, this statement does not exclude the possibility that Poirot might be homosexual. An individual does not have to be heterosexual to consider marriage – the two are not mutually exclusive. It could be argued that Christie has Poirot make this comment to cast doubt on his sexual preferences so as not to portray him as openly homosexual, and thus not overtly challenge the dominant discourse.

Nonetheless, he is still a man and is able to act in a 'feminine' manner only because he already has male privilege. According to Klein male detectives in fiction are "privileged in society" (1995:9) because they are male. "[T]he very world they occupy ensures that their

credibility and efficacy are never in question, given that they are privileged males to begin with" (Smith 2002:30).

Christie has Poirot use the expectations of society to gain the confidence of characters by having him fill the role of a father figure. He is often referred to as "Papa Poirot" (Christie [1920] 1969:148) in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* and in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*,

> Poirot leant forward, looking at her.
> "See now, mademoiselle," he said very gently, "it is Papa Poirot who asks you this. The old Papa Poirot who has much knowledge and much experience. I would not seek to entrap you, mademoiselle. Will you not trust me – and tell me where Ralph Paton is hiding?"
>
> (Christie [1926] 1974:114)

Similarly, in the short story *The Adventure of the "Western Star"* Christie has Poirot refer to himself as "Papa Poirot" (Christie 1958 [1924]:11) when speaking to Miss Marvell. His role as a father figure places Poirot in a dominant position because in a patriarchal society men and fathers in particular, have authority. He uses this position to gain the confidence of the characters and to fulfil the role of a confessor, much like a priest who is also referred to as 'father'.

In *A Murder is Announced* Christie uses the characters of Miss Hinchcliffe and Miss Murgatroyd to present an alternative to the dominant gender role expectations because they live together in an implied lesbian relationship, which would have been considered inappropriate given the social conventions of the time. But, throughout the text Hinchcliffe is compared to a man in terms of her appearance. She is described as being "attired in corduroy slacks and battledress tunic" (Christie [1950] 1979:13) and she has a "short man-like crop and weather-beaten countenance" (Christie [1950] 1979:13). "She's as tall as a man" (Christie [1950] 1979:152) and Julia Simmons describes her stance as "manly" (Christie [1950]

1979:52). In addition, her actions and comments mirror those of the male characters in the novel. Hinchcliffe reacts to the announcement of a murder in the same way as the rest of the men in the book by describing it as "daft" (Christie [1950] 1979:13). When the characters arrive at Miss Blacklock's house on the night of the murder the men (Patrick Simmons, Colonel Easterbrook and Edmund Swettenham) notice that the central heating is on:

> "You've had the central heating lit," said Patrick.
>
> (Christie [1950] 1979:23)

> "Quite a mild evening. Notice you've got your central heating on. We haven't started ours yet" [said Colonel Easterbrook].
>
> (Christie [1950] 1979:27)

> "You've got your central heating on, haven't you?" asked Edmund, with an air of originality.
>
> (Christie [1950] 1979:28)

Christie draws a parallel between Hinchcliffe and the men by having her notice, too, that the central heating is on:

> "You've got your central heating on," said Miss Hinchcliffe.
>
> (Christie [1950] 1979:28)

In contrast, Murgatroyd is feminine. Christie describes her as

> fat and amiable, [wearing] a checked tweed skirt and a shapeless pullover of brilliant royal blue. Her curly bird's nest of grey hair was in a good deal of disorder and she was slightly out of breath.
>
> (Christie [1950] 1979:13)

Her voice is described as "wistful" (Christie [1950] 1979:13) when she talks about the announcement in the *Gazette,* while Hinchcliffe is "made of sterner and more single-minded stuff… no announcement in a paper, however enigmatic, could deflect her" (Christie [1950] 1979:13). Christie further links Murgatroyd to the other women in the novel by having her, like Mrs Easterbrook and Mrs Swettenham, notice the flowers on her arrival at Miss Blacklock's house:

> "Aren't you chrysanthemums *lovely*?" gushed Mrs Easterbook.
>
> (Christie [1950] 1979:27)

> "The evenings do draw in so quickly now, don't they?" said Miss Murgatroyd to Patrick in a rather fluttery way. "What *lovely* chrysanthemums!"
>
> (Christie [1950] 1979:28)

> [Mrs Swettenham] added: "What *lovely* chrysanthemums!"
>
> (Christie [1950] 1979:28)

In addition, "Miss Murgatroyd is murdered while taking in the washing, a typically 'feminine' task" (Smith 2002:85).

The relationship between Miss Hinchcliffe and Miss Murgatroyd can also be compared to the relationship between Miss Blacklock and Miss Bunner in *A Murder is Announced*. Like Hinchcliffe, Blacklock, the so-called 'butch' and dominant partner, is also compared to a man by Mrs Goedler:

> "Letitia, you know, has really got a man's mind. She hasn't any feminine feelings or weaknesses. I don't believe she was even in love with any man. She was never particularly pretty and she didn't care for clothes. She used a little make-up in deference to prevailing custom, but not to make herself look prettier."
>
> (Christie [1950] 1979:129 -130)

Miss Blacklock's masculine behaviour is described with tongue-in-cheek sympathy: "[p]oor darling, she'd never had any of the usual fun – being in love, and leading men on and teasing them – and having a home and children and all the real fun of life" (Christie [1950] 1979:131). This implies that there is reason for the other characters to ridicule her because she does not conform to the norm.

Like Murgatroyd, Christie describes Bunner in more feminine terms. At school she was "a pretty, fair-haired, blue-eyed rather stupid girl" (Christie [1950] 1979:19), she has "flabby cheeks" (Christie [1950] 1979:19) which "quivered" (Christie [1950] 1979:19) – a sign of weakness. Moreover, she is the submissive partner in the relationship: "Miss Bunner

obediently surrendered the paper to Miss Blacklock's outstretched hand, pointing to the item with a tremulous finger" (Christie [1950] 1979:18).

However, even though Christie could use her portrayal of a lesbian couple to subvert the dominant gender role expectations, they are still described in terms of heteronormative discourse. Smith comments that "[t]hese highly caricatured lesbians, Hinch and Murgatroyd, [are] 'masculine' and 'feminine' according to the heterosexist model" (2002:73). Like Blacklock and Bunner, Anne and George, as well as Nancy Drew's friends George and Bess, the portrayal of Hinchcliffe and Murgatroyd is an example of stereotypical heteronormative discourse in which one is either 'butch' – masculine – or 'femme' – feminine. In addition, the heterosexual couples in *A Murder is Announced* are also portrayed in a stereotypical heteronormative butch/femme manner "so that Christie appears to be setting up a fairly rigid model of male/female dichotomy into which these women are placed" (Smith 2002: 70).

> The heterosexist implication is clear – it is only in traditionally sanctioned heterosexual marriage that human beings can find fulfilment – so these two, in the next best arrangement given that they are of the same sex, are portrayed as male and female and this is faithfully adhered to throughout the text.
>
> (Smith 2002:73)

Christie appears to have these characters regulate their behaviour to conform to the heteronormative norm. This presents evidence of the assimilation of the dominant heteronormative discourses of the time by Christie: even while presenting an alternative discourse such as homosexuality, Christie still reinforces the dominant contemporary heteronormativity.

In the debate about whether Christie is promoting dominant or alternative discourses in her portrayal of homosexual couples, it is essential to take into consideration the dominant social and cultural context at the time of writing, as well as Christie's own horizon of expectation.

The oppression of homosexuals was a common practice of the dominant discourse in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century – Oscar Wilde was sentenced to two years hard labour for homosexual relations with male prostitutes in London in 1895. Smith (2002:78) remarks on the widespread belief that homosexuality allegedly has "inherent connections to evil and sin" and speculates about the "effect this thinking had on Christie's decision to kill off Miss Murgatroyd, a woman who transgressed the gender codes of respectability and, therefore, acceptability in Chipping Cleghorn" (2002:78). Within the context of the prevalent system of thought that scorned homosexuality, Christie's portrayal of lesbians might even be regarded as "relaxed and 'liberal'" (Thompson 2007:387) because she presented an alternative to the socially acceptable behaviour. Curran believes that the portrayal of the couple is "matter of fact and, as far as the villagers are concerned, unremarkable" (2009:179). Curran goes on to point out that the depiction of Hinchcliffe and Murgatroyd is an improvement on earlier representations of homosexual characters in Christie's writing such as Mr Pye in *The Moving Finger,* "an extremely ladylike plump little man" (Christie [1942] 1971:24), and Mr Ellsworthy in *Murder is Easy* – who are "figures of fun" (Curran 2009:179) – and Christopher Wren in *Three Blind Mice* – "one of her campest creations" (Curran 2009:179). While socially acceptable viewpoints of the time did not consider sexuality an appropriate topic for inclusion in literature for children, Druce remarks that "a number of critics have noted what they see as a submerged lesbianism in [Enid Blyton's] girls' school stories" (1992: 255).

2.2 <u>The female detective</u>

The horizon of expectation of readers, writers and critics is shaped by the dominant discourses of their time. Individuals internalise ways of being that are valued by the society in which they operate and come to accept these as normal and natural. Their expectations about the detective in contemporaneous detective fiction would have been defined similarly.

The appropriate way for the detective to behave while carrying out the investigations and, of course, the sex of the detective were pretty much pre-defined – "readers were also members of societies whose sex-role definitions allocated all the detectives' usual talents to men" (Klein 1995:4). The female detective "is an affront to many traditional readers for whom detecting is 'man's work'" (Cranny-Francis 1990:20). Female detectives do not conform to the dominant definition of the detective of the time. Readers and critics seeking to conform to the social norms of the time in turn exercise normalising judgement to judge detective fiction against society's norms. Detective fiction that does not conform to the norm might well be judged as inferior, and sidelined, thus influencing its popularity and success and, therefore, its economic potential. As a result, in "both the classical and the hard-boiled form, detectives remained predominantly male throughout the interwar period" (Plain 2001:25).

In line with the gender role expectations of the time, in Golden Age detective fiction women were cast as "wives and mistresses, murderers and victims, assistants and troublemakers" (Klein 1995:96), but seldom as detective heroes. Women who conform to the feminine ideal of the time "can really only be suited to the role of victim – either rescued by the hero in the nick of time or ending up as the pretty, blonde body in the library" (Berglund 2000: 139). As I have mentioned earlier, knowledge works in conjunction with, and as an instrument of, power. Women who know too much are often scorned or treated with contempt because they have knowledge of sexuality, politics and science – all topics that the dominant discourse considers inappropriate for women to know about. And the education of women was not deemed necessary – even Christie, as I have noted, did not attend school when she was a young girl. A woman who does not live up to society's expectations of an ideal woman; "a woman who is independent, resourceful and assertive, will most probably be cast in the role of the perpetrator, the villainess" (Berglund 2000:139). Maureen Reddy emphasises that in a society

such as that in which Blyton and Christie lived and wrote "the whole notion of a woman in charge, and especially a woman presumably dedicated to ideals of law and order, works against traditional expectations" (Reddy, in Berglund 2000:139). Therefore, being a detective, gaining knowledge and showing an interest in unwomanly things like murder, was unsuitable for a woman. This attitude remained dominant throughout much of the twentieth century. As the title of P.D. James's detective novel reminds us, it was still an *Unsuitable Job for a Woman* in 1972 when James's novel was first published.

As an author of detective fiction Christie succeeded in a role that the society in which she worked considered unsuitable for a woman and thus she transgressed the boundaries and conventions put in place by the dominant discourse. Frances Fyfield links the prevailing viewpoint that an interest in crime was unsuitable for women, to the public fascination with Christie's disappearance in 1926. Fyfield argues that the public may have felt a "certain satisfaction" about the fact that Christie's disappearance appeared to be "the result of a disordered mind" (2006:5) because

> [s]he was, after all, a woman who wrote about murder, a female who dabbled in blood and wielded the not so blunt instruments of homicide with unseemly satisfaction and considerable success. Such an unsuitable job for a woman. Of course she had to be bonkers.
>
> (Fyfield 2006:5)

Christie reflects on this violation of the dominant systems of thought in *The Murder at the Vicarage* where Miss Marple remarks that others might think it "unwomanly" (Christie [1930] 1972:162) of her to be interested in murder. Resistance to the character of the female detective in detective fiction is associated with the idea that

> placing a female character in a male role transforms not only the role itself, but every other element of the plot as well. To have a female detective convincing as character, to have her operate as more than just an honorary male, reinforcing the masculine identity of the characterization by her aberrant, but temporary,

> occupation, requires a radical assessment of the characterization of the detective and the narrative in which she functions.
>
> (Cranny-Francis 1990:143)

"Gender stereotypes of the 1930s and 1940s clearly established woman as a creature ruled by her heart, not her head" (Plain 2001:44), and in an attempt to meet the expectations of society with regard to appropriate and acceptable gender behaviour, writers often portrayed female detectives as amateur detectives who "employed the more stereotypically feminine talents of gossip and intuition" (Klein 1995:3). In conventional culture the relational and intuitive are feminine, while the analytical is masculine – "[i]f masculinity claims exclusively to occupy the territory of reason and science, then the feminine becomes, by default, suspect, deviant and uncanny" (Rowland 2001:136-137). But, in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* Christie has Poirot emphasise the value of female 'intuition' (which is in fact the result of observation) while discussing Caroline Sheppard:

> "*Les femmes,*" generalised Poirot. "They are marvellous! They invent haphazard – and by miracle they are right. Not that it is that, really. Women observe subconsciously a thousand little details, without knowing that they are doing so. Their subconscious mind adds these little things together – and they call the result intuition. Me, I am skilled in psychology. I know these things."
>
> (Christie [1926] 1974:119)

The value of female intuition is again emphasised by Christie in *The Tuesday Night Club.* When Mr Petherick comments that "[t]o be able to sift evidence impartially, to take the facts and look at them as facts – that seems to me the only logical method of arriving at the truth" (Christie [1930] 2008:306), Christie has Joyce Lemprière counter his argument when she remarks that "women have an intuition that is denied to men" (Christie [1930] 2008:306). In this way, Christie presents an alternative to the dominant opinion that regarded men and the masculine as superior.

According to Klein, the female detective creates an additional dilemma because “contradictory scripts” (1995:107) are often provided for a female detective – investigation career, or marriage and motherhood (in which the romantic subplot reinforces dominant discourses about a woman’s domestic role in society as a mother and home-maker). There is a dichotomy between professional success and romantic fulfilment because the female detective cannot succeed in both a domestic role and as a detective.[10] By creating an elderly spinster, Christie avoided the complication of a love interest or a romantic sub-plot and was able to focus on the investigation of the crime. The domestic role expected of the woman is negated in Marple because she is elderly, unmarried and a spinster with no husband or children to care for.

[10] Although this relationship does not form part of the scope of this study, it is interesting to note that Christie presents the dichotomous relationship between detective and wife in the character of Tuppence Beresford who marries her detecting partner Tommy at the end of their first book, *The Secret Adversary* (1922). Tommy and Tuppence are happily married and raise three children. Of interest to the discussion of gender roles in this chapter is that in the short stories written by Christie in which the couple are already married, Christie refers to Tuppence as “Mrs Thomas Beresford” (Christie [1924] 2008a:3) and has Mr Carter refer to her as “Mrs Tommy” (Christie [1924] 2008a:6); Tuppence is defined in terms of her status as Tommy’s wife, rather than as an individual in her own right.

3 EMPOWERING WOMEN IN BLYTON AND CHRISTIE

Regardless of the prevalence of conservative patriarchal heteronormative discourses, toward the end of the nineteenth century and in the early twentieth century, emergent discourses about female independence became more widespread. Evidence of this can be found in the popularity of the rebellious and independent character Jo March in *Little Women* (1868). Similarly, Frank L. Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) depicts female rulers and portrays housework as oppressive. The Nancy Drew books, first published in the United States of America in 1930, and books that followed this trend, illustrated the emergent discourses about the role of young women and girls and allowed for the inclusion of the "resourceful, high spirited heroine" (Hunt 1994:107). Mason elaborates on the "growing market for female adventurers, and eventually the girl detective emerged as the most 'liberated' and celebrated of heroines" (1995:10).

> Nancy manages the almost impossible feat of being wholesomely 'feminine' – glamorous, gracious, stylish, tactful – while also proving herself strong, resourceful, and bold, the most independent of girl sleuths. Nancy is a paradox….
> (Mason 1995:49)

According to Bindel, "[m]ore than half of all novels in the [crime fiction] genre are written by women, and their books are most popular with a female audience" (2007:5). In addition, "women read more books than men". This idea is reiterated by Symons who remarks that "[m]any of the detective stories were written by women, and essentially also *for* women" (1992:96). In line with dominant heteronormative gender roles which place men in positions of power, the detective in Golden Age detective fiction is more often than not a man: Christie has Hercule Poirot, Dorothy L. Sayers created Lord Peter Wimsey, Margery Allingham's hero is Albert Campion and Ngaio March's writing features Roderick Alleyn. Fyfield argues that

Christie's success (coupled with her disappearance in 1926 and evidence of her having a "disordered mind"),

> inadvertently created the idea that women are ideally suited to the writing of murder mysteries, even though this talent means that they are possibly intriguingly warped, manipulative and unfeminine personalities to do it in the first place.
> (2006:5)

The popularity of detective fiction among both men and women readers crosses social boundaries between the sexes. In the same way, Mason comments that, among children, "[m]ysteries are the favourite genre of both sexes" (1995:6). Enid Blyton's writing was popular with both boys and girls and this may be attributed to the fact that "Blyton's adventure and family stories are about groups of children of both sexes" (Druce 1992:256), and thus would appeal to child readers of both sexes. Birgitta Berglund reiterates this point by referring to Maureen Reddy's suggestion that "writers who want to reach large groups of readers tend to choose a male protagonist rather than a female one, as women are on the whole much more willing to read about men than the other way round" (2000:138). This is a clear indication of how the dominant discourse operated in society at the time – girls and women, in their inferior position, were willing to read about boys and men, but superior boys and men were seldom willing to 'lower' themselves to read about girls and women.

3.1 Miss Jane Marple

Miss Marple is "the most famous of female fictional detectives" (Bargainnier 1980:66); she appears in 12 novels and 20 short stories, with her first appearance being in the short story *The Tuesday Night Club*, published in *The Royal Magazine* in December 1927.[11] Few female detectives have been as popular as Hercule Poirot and Sherlock Holmes, with only Miss Marple coming close to achieving the popularity of her male counterparts.

[11] *The Tuesday Night Club* was later published as a chapter in *The Thirteen Problems* (1932).

In her creation of Miss Marple, Christie wrote about what she knew, presenting a "tall, slender, dignified late-Victorian of great shrewdness" (Bargainnier 1980:68) with an upper middle-class Victorian background. Christie remarks that her grandmother provided inspiration for the character of Miss Marple:

> Miss Marple has some faint affinity with my own grandmother, also a pink and white pretty old lady who, although having led the most sheltered and Victorian of lives, nevertheless always appeared to be intimately acquainted with all the depths of human depravity.
>
> (Christie [1953] 2008: Foreword, n.p.)

In addition, Caroline Sheppard in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* also laid the foundation for the development of the character who would come to embody the archetypal spinster detective:

> I liked the part [Caroline Sheppard] played in village life: and I liked the idea of village life reflected through the life of the doctor and his masterful sister.
> I think at that moment, in St. Mary Mead, though I did not yet know it, Miss Marple was born….
>
> (Christie 1993:499)

Like Miss Marple, Caroline uses the tools available to an unmarried spinster in a rural English village – observation and gossip – to gather her information.

> Caroline can do any amount of finding out by sitting placidly at home. I don't know how she manages it, but there it is. I suspect that the servants and the tradesmen constitute her Intelligence Corps. When she goes out, it is not to gather information, but to spread it. At that, too, she is amazingly expert.
>
> (Christie [1926] 1974:7)

Barton notes that in fiction female detectives often use their marginal status "to their advantage – Miss Marple and Jessica Fletcher (of *Murder She Wrote*) rather benefited from being the observer, slightly removed" (2007:31). Throughout *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* Caroline makes a number of correct observations, including the fact that Mrs Ferrars killed her husband: "Mrs. Ferrars's husband died just over a year ago, and Caroline has constantly

asserted, without the least foundation for the assertion, that his wife poisoned him" (Christie [1926] 1974:8), and that the police are wrong to suspect Parker of the murder. We read:

> "The police suspect Parker," I said as I rose to my feet and prepared to ascend to bed. "There seems a fairly clear case against him".
> "Parker!" said my sister. "Fiddlesticks! That inspector must be a perfect fool. Parker indeed! Don't tell me."
>
> (Christie [1926] 1974:60)

Even though Poirot's sidekick in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* appears to be Dr Sheppard, it is Caroline who actually assists Poirot with his investigations:

> Caroline was at home. She had had a visit from Poirot and was very pleased and important about it.
> "I'm helping him with the case," she explained.
>
> (Christie [1926] 1974:132)

The spinster "has been a recurring icon in British literature, dating from Jane Austen's Miss Bates in *Emma* and proliferating between the wars" (Mezei 2007:104). According to Berglund, the spinster detective was a familiar figure in fiction at the time Agatha Christie was writing and it reflected the reality of an England that was experiencing a "surplus of unmarried women" (2000:144) following the First World War. "F.M. Mayor mockingly called this character the 'U.F.' (Unnecessary Female)" (Mezei 2007:104) – emphasising the marginal role of this character and the fact that the lonely unmarried and childless spinster is often the object of pity, and sometimes ridicule. The spinster is isolated and divided from society at large and does not conform to the heteronormative gender role expectations of wife and mother. However, elderly spinsters are sexually unavailable and assumed to be undesirable anyway, and this shifts the traditional balance of power from male authority into the hands of the spinsters because they offer no threat to male domination. The sexual temptation of men by women such as Lilith, Eve and Morgaine Le Fay, among others, has long been regarded as a ploy by evil women to seek to dominate men. But elderly spinsters in their sexual unavailability offer no temptation or threat.

In her depiction of the character of Miss Marple Christie manipulates the pity and ridicule invoked by the stereotypical spinster who is assumed to have no power or authority. But, as Christie's novels about her prove, Marple does have power. By solving crimes, she exercises power over, and can be said, even, to emasculate those traditionally considered to have power, thus subverting traditional power relations. Like Caroline Sheppard, at first glance Miss Marple appears to conform to expectations. She appears to be a harmless old lady caught up in the spinsterish pastimes of knitting and gossip. However, there is in fact far more to her than meets the eye:

> [H]er careful observation of human nature and her distrust of mere surface appearance, her orderly approach to her cases, her independence and fearlessness, her ability and willingness to use the images which others have of her, her consciousness of her own worth both as an individual and as a detective, and her essential ruthlessness on behalf of the innocent – expressed in her self-confidence and determination – make her a formidable adversary of evil. In Miss Marple, Christie has taken the traditional spinster of literature and added qualities which contrast with or transcend the convention and in so doing has created one of the most famous women of twentieth century fiction.
>
> (Bargainnier 1980:78)

Christie uses social expectations of how a spinster should behave to give Marple power. The spinster observes society without being observed, as a socially marginal figure on the fringes of society, "[o]utside the immediate family circle, yet part of the household or village" (Mezei 2007:106).

> Even though these spinsters occupy a *place* outside the conventional family unit and possess limited powers in both the private and public sphere, during cataclysmic events like murder or the death of a mother, their perceptions and roles are pushed to the fore, ways of seeing are called into question, and readers are, as a consequence, forced to examine their own (mis)perceptions and deceptions. Yet, in each case, once the cataclysmic event is resolved, the conventional order is, on the whole, re-established by these spinsters through their effective surveillance.
>
> (Mezei 2007:116)

The power of the village spinster is highlighted in *The Murder at the Vicarage* when we hear the vicar make the following point to Lawrence Redding:

> "My dear young man, you underestimate the detective instinct of village life. In St Mary Mead every one knows your most intimate affairs. There is no detective in England equal to a spinster lady of uncertain age with plenty of time on her hands."
>
> (Christie [1930] 1972:25)

Christie also emphasises this idea in *A Murder is Announced* when she has Sir Henry Clithering, the former Commissioner of Scotland Yard, remark to Craddock about spinsters like Miss Marple, to whom he refers as "old Pussies":

> "Don't you despise the old Pussies in this village of yours, my boy," he said. "In case this turns out to be a high-powered mystery, which I don't suppose for a moment it will, remember that an elderly unmarried woman who knits and gardens is streets ahead of any detective sergeant. She can tell you what might have happened and what ought to have happened and even what actually *did* happen! And she can tell you *why* it happened!"
>
> (Christie [1950] 1979:36)

He reiterates his belief in the detecting skill of elderly spinsters when he remarks that "[t]hey hear everything. They see everything. And, unlike the famous adage, they speak all evil" (Christie [1950] 1979:73). Christie even has Sir Henry claim that Miss Marple is "just the finest detective God ever made. Natural genius cultivated in a suitable soil" (Christie [1950] 1979:36). Nonetheless, it is important to remember that, even though Clithering has much praise and admiration for Miss Marple, his reference to elderly spinsters like her as "old Pussies" (Christie [1950] 1979:36) is blatantly sexist and derogatory as is the remark that "they speak all evil" (Christie [1950] 1979:73).

Part of Marple's logical and well-ordered strategy of investigation is to mislead the characters into thinking that she is merely a harmless old spinster who spends her days engaged in idle gossip over a cup of tea or a sherry. She also often uses her day-to-day activities to screen her observation of village life: "[g]ardening is as good as a smoke screen, and the habit of observing birds through powerful glasses can always be turned to account" (Christie [1930] 1972:15). Christie reinforces this idea by having the vicar refer to Miss Marple's garden as the

"danger point" (Christie [1930] 1972:19). She appears frail, with a black lace cap and mittens, a shawl over her shoulders and knitting clutched in her hands.

> Miss Jane Marple was very nearly, if not quite, as Craddock had pictured her. She was far more benignant than he had imagined and a good deal older. She seemed indeed very old. She had snow-white hair and a pink crinkled face and very soft innocent blue eyes, and she was enmeshed in fleecy wool that she was knitting and which turned out to be a baby's shawl.
>
> (Christie [1950] 1979:74)

Marple also dismisses her own talents, further leading the reader, and of course the murderer, to underestimate her: "I've no doubt I am *quite* wrong. I'm so stupid about these things" (Christie [1930] 1972:142). As Berglund notes, "the spinster sleuth can also turn her own low status to her advantage by making people tell her things they would never tell a real detective, because they never suspect her capacity" (2000: 145). It is possible, even, to claim that, like Christie and Blyton, the character of Miss Marple is presented as a self-created persona – dressing and behaving in a manner expected of an elderly spinster. She successfully misleads one into thinking that she is a harmless old lady. As Hart observes,

> she wore a good disguise. How shamelessly unthreatening she was! No notebook, no car, no assistants, no artificial capacity – all she appeared to be was a sweet old lady, sometimes even a dotty old lady.
>
> (1997:124)

Regardless of Miss Marple appearing to be a harmless old lady, in *The Murder at the Vicarage* Christie hints early in the novel that readers should not underestimate the elderly spinster: she has the vicar describe Marple as "dangerous":

> "Miss Marple is a white-haired old lady with a gentle, appealing manner – Miss Whetherby is a mixture of vinegar and gush. Of the two Miss Marple is much the more dangerous."
>
> (Christie [1930] 1972:12)

While it might seem odd, initially, to describe Miss Marple as dangerous, it is in fact a very appropriate description, because while she initially appears fragile and frail, she sees all,

knows all, and is ruthless in her drive to expose the villain. Christie reinforces this idea by having the vicar comment on the virtues of Miss Marple:

> Of all the ladies in my congregation, I considered her by far the shrewdest. Not only does she see and hear practically everything that goes on, but draws amazingly neat and apposite deductions from the facts that come under her notice.
> If I were at any time to set out on a career of deceit, it would be of Miss Marple that I should be afraid.
>
> (Christie [1930] 1972:161-162)

This image of Miss Marple as dangerous is also evident in *Nemesis* when the Home Secretary describes Miss Marple as the "most frightening woman I ever met" (Christie [1971] 1974:216).

As I mentioned earlier, Miss Marple and female detectives in general have often been criticised for depending too much on intuition. However, Marple's position on the edge of society provides her with the opportunity to observe that society without being observed herself – "in the art of seeing without being seen, Miss Marple had no rival" (Christie [1930] 1972:140) – and in turn develop her knowledge of human nature. Hence "her 'intuition' is actually the result of close observation of human types" (Bargainnier 1980:74). This idea is emphasised when Christie has Marple say:

> "Really, I have no gifts – no gifts at all – except perhaps a certain knowledge of human nature. People, I find, are apt to be far too trustful. I'm afraid that I have a tendency always to believe the *worst.* Not a nice trait. But so often justified by subsequent events."
>
> (Christie [1950] 1979:77-78)

Here, again, we learn about Miss Marple's intuition, this time from the spinster detective herself:

> "You're laughing, my dear," said Miss Marple, "but after all, that is a very sound way of arriving at the truth. It's really what people call intuition and make such a fuss about. Intuition is like reading a word without having to spell it out. A child can't do that because it has had so little experience. But a grown-up person knows the word because they've seen it before."
>
> (Christie [1930] 1972:65)

Miss Marple "observes keenly and deduces soundly, drawing for her knowledge of human duplicity and evil on a lifetime spent watching the inhabitants of St Mary Mead" (Binyon 1989:34). She

> first collected all the available facts by all the available means viewed them in light of her vast knowledge of erring human nature in the anthill of St Mary Mead, and then applied logic to reach a conclusion.
>
> (Hart 1997:127)

Smith notes that "the success of Christie's Miss Marple relies on her having 'masculine' abilities along with 'feminine' modes of behaviour" (2002:29). Here, her 'masculine' abilities refers to the logical and orderly way she processes all the information available to her to solve the mystery. The 'feminine' modes of behaviour include the "available means" that Miss Marple uses to collect the facts – tea with the neighbours, a visit with friends, a sherry here, a chat over the garden gate there – all of which are part of Miss Marple's investigative process. While Miss Marple has also been criticised for her dependence upon "social chit-chat and gossip" (Bargainnier 1980:75), this is also a characteristic of the expected behaviour of a woman in her position. The horizon of expectation of the reader, and that of the characters in the fiction, create an expectation of an old spinster who is essentially harmless and who fills her time with idle gossip. If she went about making enquiries like a typical detective her disguise of a nosy old spinster would fall away and she would not make nearly as much progress in solving the case – "[i]t is her success in playing the expected spinster role which enables her to gather needed information" (Bargainnier 1980:75). As part of the first description of Miss Marple in *The Murder at the Vicarage*, Christie has the vicar and his wife Griselda discuss some of the elderly spinsters in the village, pointing out their stereotypically spinsterish knowledge of everything that happens in the village:

> "Mrs Price Ridley, Miss Wetherby, Miss Hartnell, and that terrible Miss Marple"
> "I rather like Miss Marple," I said. "She has, at least, a sense of humor."

> "She's the worst cat in the village," said Griselda. "And she always knows every single thing that happens – and draws the worst inferences from it."
>
> (Christie [1930] 1972:8)

The idea of Marple often being engaged in gossip is reinforced in *A Murder is Announced* when we hear Julia comment about her: "That old woman is the prying kind. And a mind like a sink, I should think. Real Victorian type" (Christie [1950] 1979:139). However, while gossip and snooping are not widely considered to be positive character traits, a characteristic of Miss Marple that I personally find appealing, is that Christie created her with an awareness of her own weaknesses, especially her penchant for observing her neighbours and engaging in gossip. When remarking on Lawrence Redding and Anne Protheroe meeting in the studio to conduct their affair, Miss Marple observes: "Mrs. Protheroe is met at the studio by Mr. Redding. They go in together – and, human nature being what it is, I'm afraid they realise that I shan't leave the garden till they come out again!" (Christie [1930] 1972:180). The vicar also holds this opinion about Miss Marple's self-knowledge: "I never liked Miss Marple better than at this moment, with her humorous perception of her own weakness" (Christie [1930] 1972:180). With reference to gossip, Christie has Marple remark that "idle tittle-tattle is very wrong and unkind, but it is so often true, isn't it?" (Christie [1930] 1972:16).

Because of her marginal position in society, Marple is not expected to have much experience or worldly knowledge, and she is not expected to be a successful detective. This is evident in *The Murder at the Vicarage* when the Chief Constable remarks about Miss Marple. He says:

> "I really believe that wizened-up old maid thinks she knows everything there is to know. And hardly been out of this village all her life. Preposterous. What can she know of life?"
>
> I said mildly that though doubtless Miss Marple knew next to nothing of Life with a capital L, she knew practically everything that went on in St. Mary Mead.
>
> (Christie [1930] 1972:57)

However, the vicar's unspoken thoughts about Miss Marple knowing "practically everything that went on in St. Mary Mead" should not be overlooked, since by the end of the novel this is proven to be true. In *A Murder is Announced,* Rydesdale also underestimates the detective skill of Miss Marple. In fact, the reference to his "smiling tolerantly" (Christie [1950] 1979:79) emphasises that he has a patronising attitude towards her. This attitude would have been informed by the socially entrenched ways of thinking about how an elderly spinster is expected to behave.

> Rydesdale said, smiling tolerantly:
> "Are you suggesting that he was persuaded by someone to go out and take pot shots at a room full of people? Rather a tall order."
> "I think he was told that it was a *joke*," said Miss Marple. "He was paid for doing it of course. Paid, that is, to put an advertisement in the newspaper, to go out and spy out the household premises, and then, on the night in question, he was to go there, assume a mask and a black cloak and throw open a door, brandishing a torch, and cry 'Hands up!'"
>
> (Christie [1950] 1979:79)

While Rydesdale is obviously dismissive of Miss Marple's opinion of the events that led up to Rudi Sherz's entering Miss Blacklock's house and threatening the guests with a gun, towards the end of the novel Christie reveals that Marple's interpretation of the events is in fact correct, and it is revealed that Miss Blacklock "told her story of a sham hold-up at a party to Rudi Sherz, explained that she wanted a stranger to act the part of the 'gangster,' and offered him a generous sum for his co-operation" (Christie [1950] 1979:205).

Many people underestimate Marple. However, Christie has the vicar in *Murder at the Vicarage* point out that "[f]or all her fragile appearance, Miss Marple is capable of holding her own with any policeman or Chief Constable in existence" (Christie [1930] 1972:51). And she is usually right! When the vicar suggests that "Miss Marple may be mistaken" Griselda disagrees with her husband and argues that "[s]he never is. That kind of old cat is always

right." (Christie [1930] 1972:17). Later in the same novel, the vicar defends Marple on two different occasions:

> "If Miss Marple says she had no pistol with her, you can take it for granted that it is so," I said. "If there was the least possibility of such a thing, Miss Marple would have been on to it like a knife."
>
> (Christie [1930] 1972:57)

> I was quite sure that Anne Protheroe had had no pistol with her since Miss Marple had said so. Miss Marple is not the type of elderly lady who makes mistakes. She has got an uncanny knack of being always right.
>
> (Christie [1930] 1972:74)

Klein (1995:89) remarks that Miss Marple is often the only female detective included in surveys of readers' most popular fictional detectives. Why was Christie's Miss Marple such a successful creation? Perhaps it is because in the character of Miss Marple Christie does not challenge and threaten the status quo and the dominant discourses of the time about the role of women in society relative to male authority. Miss Marple is "so essentially feminine in her ways and manners, that she can get away with murder – or at least the detection of murder – without threatening male authority" (Berglund 2000:145). She is frail and fragile so she outwits the authority of the professional detective and her brilliant nephew, not to mention the villain and the rest of the village, in a subtle and indirect way, without overtly threatening their authority and superiority. Berglund links Miss Marple to the expectations in the early twentieth century of a Golden Age detective:

> [A]t first glance she would seem to go against all rules. What we have is a detective who is not only a woman, but also a woman who is neither young nor pretty nor, it would seem, prominent in any other way, but quite plain, usually badly dressed, ostensibly quite unprofessional, seemingly scatter-brained and even slightly ridiculous old maid. We are light-years away from Sherlock Holmes, the mastermind – and that is precisely the reason for her success.
>
> (2000:145)

In the character of Miss Marple, Christie exploits the dominant discourse of her society that expected an elderly spinster to be slightly scatter-brained and senile, often engaged in gossip,

and essentially harmless. However, as is evident from the discussion above, even though Miss Marple appears to fit into the stereotype of an elderly spinster, she is not harmless. Thus Christie subverts and undermines that expectation without challenging the dominant patriarchal discourse of the time.

3.2 Georgina (George) Kirrin

Georgina, or George as she prefers to be called, is arguably the most popular character in the *Famous Five* series, if not the most popular character created by Enid Blyton. According to what respondents said when questioned by Rudd, "the Five was by far the most popular series" (2000:88) and George the most popular character.

> [N]ot only was George pre-eminently popular among girls, but she was also the most popular Five (human) character with boys…. Given the unwillingness of most boys to read fiction about girls (albeit girls will read fiction about boys) – let alone find them more popular than the boys – this is quite an achievement.
>
> (Rudd 2000:88)

Her tomboyishness may well allow George to appeal to both male and female readers. George as tomboy would fit in with the male characters, thus appealing to male readers. However, the rebellious tomboy would appeal to similarly rebellious female readers.

George was "Blyton's all time favourite character" (Rudd 2000:111), and as mentioned in Chapter Two, there are a number of references that claim that George is based on Blyton. According to Baverstock, Blyton "told her agent that she realised that George was a reflection of herself as a child, longing to be like her brothers" (2000:29), and Druce claims that Blyton "admitted that George came close to a self portrait" (1992:120). Like Blyton, George rebels against some of the dominant discourses that reinforce the domestic and submissive role of women – both George and Blyton are strong, independent females.

Perhaps because of the autobiographical nature of George, Blyton places emphasis on George in the series. For example, in *Five Go Adventuring Again*, the second book in the series, Blyton provides readers with a detailed description of George:

> She would not allow anyone to call her Georgina, and now even the mistresses called her George. She really was very like a boy with her short curly hair, and her boyish ways.
>
> (Blyton [1943] 1967:9)

Blyton does not, however, offer a description of George's cousin Anne who is featured in the scene with her.

As I have already noted, in line with the dominant heteronormative discourse of the time, Julian, the eldest male character in the *Famous Five* stories fills the stereotypical male role as protector and is physically more powerful. Julian plays the role of leader. Male characters who show 'weak' or 'feminine' behaviour, such as Lucian in *The Ship of Adventure,* are portrayed in a negative light because they do not conform to the social expectations of male behaviour at the time. According to Lurie, many authors "conventionalised" their stories and characters to suit the "contemporary tastes" (2003:15) of the time – they regulated their stories to ensure conformity with the current expectations. Hence, the independence and power of the character of George is significant in relation to the time of writing because, through her portrayal of George, Enid Blyton challenges this dominant heteronormative discourse and presents an alternative – an independent female. However, during the war years women were called on to "step outside traditional gender roles" (Rudd 2000:112). Therefore the independence of the character of George could be seen to have been a reinforcement and reflection of some discourses at the time which called on women to show strength of character, and self-sufficiency.

Blyton also reinforces the widespread belief that boys were more valued by society at the time by having George believe that being like a boy is better than being a girl. This point of view is reinforced in her writing in comments that laud the masculine by implying that masculine behaviour is decent while girls are petty and catty:

> Julian gave George a gentle clap on the back. "Good old George! She's actually learned, not only to give in, but to give in gracefully! George, you're more like a boy than ever when you act like that."
> George glowed. She liked Julian to say she was like a boy. She didn't want to be petty and catty and bear malice as so many girls did. But Anne looked a little indignant.
> "It isn't *only* boys that can learn to give in decently, and things like that," she said. "Heaps of girls do. Well, I jolly well hope I do myself!"
> (Blyton [1947] 1967:23)

Blyton does point out that not all girls should be described in a negative manner when she has Anne comment that girls can also behave decently. Nonetheless, Anne's comment comes across more as an afterthought and creates the impression that while 'decent' behaviour is the norm among boys, it is an exception among girls.

George's desire to behave like a boy and shun any kind of expectations related to her femininity is emphasised by Blyton throughout the *Famous Five* books. One of the ways that Blyton reinforces George's preference for being seen to be masculine is by having George call herself by a boy's name – George, instead of Georgina.

> "No," she said. "I'm not Georgina."
> "Oh!" said Anne, in surprise. "Then who are you?"
> "I'm George," said the girl. "I shall only answer if you call me George. I hate being a girl. I won't be. I don't like doing the things that girls do. I like doing the things that boys do. I can climb better than any boy, and swim faster too. I can sail a boat as well as any fisher-boy on this coast. You're to call me George. Then I'll speak to you. But I shan't if you don't."
> (Blyton [1942] 1967:18)

This sentiment is reinforced in *Five Run Away Together* when Blyton points out that George "had always wanted to be a boy, and would never answer if she was called Georgina. So

everyone called her George" (Blyton [1944] 1967:7-8). It is interesting to note that other characters, including George's parents, comply with her wish to be called George rather than Georgina.

> "Do you call her 'George'?" asked Anne, in surprise. "I thought her name was Georgina."
> "So it is," said her aunt. "But George hates being a girl, and we have to call her George, as if she was a boy. The naughty girl won't answer if we call her Georgina."
> (Blyton [1942] 1967:14)

This highlights the power that Blyton gives to the character of George in that other characters obey her wishes.

One might speculate that the character of George was influenced by Jo March in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* which was "radical at the time of writing" (Lurie 2004:14) and is referred to as one of Blyton's favourite novels. Jo March in *Little Women* was nothing like the typical female characters of the time, and like Alcott did with Jo, Blyton gave George a boy's name. Similarly, in Edward Stratemeyer's Nancy Drew series (first published in 1930), Nancy's tomboy friend George also prefers the masculine version of her name, reinforcing her desire for others to perceive her as masculine. A female character named Jo features twice in the *Famous Five* adventures: in *Five Fall into Adventure* and *Five Have a Wonderful Time.* Like George, Jo is a girl who prefers to be called by a boy's name and who behaves like a boy.

> "…What's you name?"
> "Jo," said the girl.
> "But that's a *boy's* name," said Dick.
> "So's George. But you said she was a girl," said Jo.
> (Blyton [1950] 1991:33)

Another tomboy with similar characteristics, Henry, is featured in *Five Go to Mystery Moor*. Blyton has George show evidence of character growth in her interaction with these other tomboy characters by showing her learning to accept these characters even though their tomboyish nature, which mirrors her own, threatens George's distinctiveness and individuality.

In addition to calling herself by a boy's name, George's appearance reinforces her wish to be seen as a boy: she wears her hair short and she dresses in boy's clothes. We read that "[s]he had very short curly hair, almost as short as a boy's" (Blyton [1942] 1967:18); and that "George was dressed, as usual, exactly like a boy, in jeans and jersey" (Blyton [1944] 1967:7-8). Throughout the *Famous Five* series George's tomboy behaviour is reinforced through repeated references that associate her with being a boy. Even in the first reference to George in *Five on a Treasure Island* Blyton has Julian comment: "I wonder what Georgina's like. Funny name, isn't it. More like a boy's than a girl's." (Blyton [1942] 1967:9). Alf, the fisher-boy, uses a masculine form of address and calls George "Master George" (Blyton [1942] 1967:38), as does Old Mr Sanders at Kirrin Farm:

> "Why, if it isn't Master George!" said the old fellow with a grin. George grinned too. She loved being called Master instead of Miss.
>
> (Blyton [1943] 1967:35)

George's mother, Aunt Fanny, also compares her to a man: "…You'll be quite safe with George. She can handle a boat like a man" (Blyton [1942] 1967:49). Blyton also has George undertake traditionally masculine tasks like driving the caravan in *Five Go off in a Caravan*:

> "I'm going to drive *our* caravan," said George. "Anne wouldn't be any good at it, though I'll let her have a turn at it sometimes. Driving is a man's job."
>
> (Blyton [1946] 1967:28)

The above examples also illustrate how Blyton has George and Aunt Fanny assimilate the dominant discourse which leads them to believe that tasks like steering a boat and driving a caravan should be undertaken by men because women are not capable of such activities.

On several occasions George is mistaken for a boy. This mistaken identity allows Blyton to have George behave in a traditionally masculine manner and gives her power in a man's world. Blyton has George express a great deal of pleasure at these cases of mistaken

identity, portraying her desire to be thought of as masculine rather than feminine in a positive light:

> George couldn't help feeling pleased. This boy thought *she* was a boy! George was always gracious to people who made the mistake of thinking she was a boy.
> (Blyton [1947] 1967:60)

In *Five Go to Smuggler's Top* George is delighted when Mr Lenoir mistakes her for a boy:

> "… Three boys for Sooty, and one girl for Marybelle. Ha ha!"
> He evidently thought George was a boy, and she did look rather like one – she was wearing shorts and a jersey, as usual, and her curly hair was very short.
> Nobody said that George wasn't a boy. Certainly George was not going to! She, Dick and Julian shook hands with Mr Lenoir.'
> (Blyton [1945] 1967:49-50)

> "Everyone grinned when Mr Lenoir called George a boy. He never seemed to realise she was a girl. She grinned, too. She wasn't going to tell him she wasn't a boy!"
> (Blyton [1945] 1967:186)

Like George, the tomboy characters Jo and Henry not only have boys' names but are also mistaken for boys. In *Five Fall into Adventure*, Dick mistakes Jo for a boy and punches her:

> The boy hit out with his right fist and caught Dick unexpectedly on the jawbone. Dick looked astounded. He hit out, too, and sent the tousle-headed boy flying.
> (Blyton [1950] 1991:17)

However, when he discovers his mistake he regrets his actions: "It's the first time I've ever hit a girl, and I hope it'll be the last" (Blyton [1950] 1991:19). Dick's expression of regret draws attention to the difference in what was, and still is, considered to be acceptable treatment of boys and girls – while it is acceptable to hit another boy, it is not acceptable to hit a girl. Blyton has Dick regulate his own behaviour and express disappointment at his not conforming to the social expectations of how boys and men should treat girls and women.

Even though Blyton endorses and reinforces some of the dominant gender role expectations of the time, she also presents alternatives. In particular, Blyton has George break the gender rules that defined the expected behaviour of women at the time of writing. Even though

George is not a boy, Blyton subverts the dominant expectations of how girls should behave by making her capable in various situations. George succeeds at activities where boys and male characters would traditionally dominate, such as swimming and rowing her boat. Her skill in such activities and situations empowers her. In the *Famous Five* books readers are regularly reminded of George's skills: "…the boys found that George was a much better swimmer than they were" (Blyton [1942] 1967:35); "the girl cleverly worked her boat in and out of the rocks" (Blyton [1942] 1967:51); "the others watched in admiration as the girl guided the boat skilfully in and out of the hidden rocks" (Blyton [1944] 1967:85). George is better at rowing than the boys. She manoeuvres the boat in the more difficult situations, and she even takes the oars from the traditional eldest male leader, usurping his power:

> "Isn't George going to take the oars and guide to boat in?"
> "Yes," said George. "We've come to the difficult bit now, where we've got to weave our way in and out of the different rocks that keep sticking up. Give me the oars, Ju."
> (Blyton [1944] 1967:84-85)

In this way Blyton presents the possibility that girls can do the same things as boys, and just as well as boys, if not better.

Blyton also emphasises George's dominant position over Julian in *Five are Together Again*, when George, with the help of Timmy, pushes the villains' boat into the sea and sets it adrift. Blyton has Julian recognise that "he would never have thought of doing such daring things himself!" (Blyton [1963] 1971:174). Blyton also gives George power in *Five Go Adventuring Again.* Throughout the novel George is suspicious of the tutor Mr Roland. However, the other children and George's parents refuse to believe her. In the end Mr Roland is revealed to be the villain: "[h]er father looked most uncomfortable. He felt very guilty for having punished George and Timothy. They had been right about Mr Roland and he had been wrong" (Blyton [1943] 1967:167). In this way Blyton highlights how girls and women (and children) are

marginalised in a hierarchical patriarchal society, and how their opinions are often disregarded by the dominant adult males.

As a result of the depiction of often contradictory discourses in her writing, it is difficult to establish whether Blyton supports the dominant heteronormative discourses of her time, or whether she promotes alternative discourses that challenge the status quo and advocate female agency. It appears that she does both. Even though Blyton has George break the gender rules and explore alternative discourses to those advocated by society, Blyton often reminds us that George is "as good as a boy any day!" (Blyton [1963] 1971:66). In this regard, Rudd refers to Cadogan and Craig who describe George as being in a "false position… like all tomboys, she can be 'as good as', but this implies a basic deficiency. She can never be the genuine article" (2000:111). This links to the dominant opinion of the time that because George is still not a boy she is inferior, even 'other'. Blyton reinforces this opinion by having Anne accuse George of being a fake:

> You won't find that my brothers take much notice of you if you act as if you knew everything. They're *real* boys, not pretend boys, like you.
>
> (Blyton [1942] 1967:18)

However, in *Five on a Treasure Island,* when George helps Anne to swim, Blyton has Anne comment: "I'll never be as good as you – but I'd like to be as good as the boys" (Blyton [1942] 1967:46). In this way Blyton has Anne imply that George is in fact better than the boys.

An aspect of the social conventions of the time reflected in Blyton's writing reinforces stereotypical masculine behaviour and the idea that 'boys don't cry'. Boys and men are expected to be strong, to be leaders, and to be in control of their emotions. In *Five Go to Smuggler's Top* Blyton emphasises that, in an effort to conform to social expectations of masculine behaviour, George does not cry:

> "Anne began to cry. Marybelle, frightened and puzzled, at once began to sob too. George felt tears pricking the backs of her eyelids, but she blinked them away. George never cried!"
>
> (Blyton [1945] 1967:137)

This desire for George to fit into the mould of appropriate masculine behaviour by not crying is evident in *Five on a Treasure Island*:

> "… Father said I couldn't keep Timothy any more, and Mother backed Father up and said Tim must go. I cried for days – and I never do cry, you know, because boys don't and I like to be like a boy."
> "Boys do cry sometimes," began Anne, looking at Dick, who had been a bit of a cry-baby three or four years back. Dick gave her a sharp nudge, and she said no more.
> George looked at Anne.
> "Boy's don't cry," she said, obstinately. "Anyway, I've never seen one, and I always try not to cry myself. It's so babyish. But I just couldn't help it when Timothy had to go. He cried too."
>
> (Blyton [1942] 1967:31)

Blyton has George comment that she "never" cries because "boys don't cry". In addition, Blyton also has Dick show his desire to be masculine and conform to social expectations about how boys should behave when he gives Anne "a sharp nudge" to prevent her from revealing that he used to cry.

When George does cry, lose her temper and sulk, Blyton portrays this behaviour in a negative light and associates it with typically feminine behaviour. This is evident in *Five Go to Mystery Moor:* "[t]o think that George would behave like a sulky little girl" (Blyton [1954] 1969:51). By including this aspect of George's behaviour and allowing her to show her emotions (more so than any of the other characters in the series), Blyton has George display behaviour that would have been regarded as appropriate gender behaviour at the time. In this way Blyton may be deliberately highlighting the tension between subverting the dominant discourse and reinforcing it. Even though Blyton has George rebel against femininity by preferring to behave in a masculine manner, she still has George display stereotypically feminine behaviour by crying and sulking. Evidence of stereotypical female behaviour is also evident in *Five Fall into*

Adventure. Even though George appears to oppose the dominant social conventions about acceptable female behaviour at the time, in this story Blyton has George remark: “Well, there’s one thing certain – I shall NEVER marry a scientist” (Blyton [1950] 1991:14). The underlying assumption in George’s remark is that, in line with the social conventions that promote marriage and a domestic role among women, she assumes that she will get married. George overlooks the possibility that she might become a scientist, or pursue another career herself because this is not a choice readily available to girls and women in her experience.

It is possible to speculate about whether or not in George Blyton created a girl who wants to be a boy because the only way George can be successful in a male dominant world is to be masculine, or whether Blyton may have wanted to emphasise that George is a girl, not a boy. By not having George conform to the gender role expectations of the time, Blyton may be undermining, at least to some extent, the social conventions of the time.

However, George’s desire to be like a boy can be seen to be evidence of sexism in Blyton since it reinforces the idea that males are more privileged than the females who are often thought of as inferior. In the *Famous Five* series, when the children succeed in solving the mystery and assist in capturing the villains, George’s father, Uncle Quentin, often praises George. In *Five on a Treasure Island,*

> [Uncle Quentin] “ruffled George’s short curly hair. “And I’m proud of you, too, George,” he said. “You’re as good as a boy any day!”
>
> (Blyton [1942] 1967:162)

This is also evident in *Five on Kirrin Island again,*

> “Good girl,” said her father, and gave her a big hug. “Honestly, George, you do behave as bravely as any boy. I’m proud of you.”
> George thought that was the nicest thing her father had ever said to her.
>
> (Blyton [1947] 1967:144)

In the examples above it is important to note that he expresses his pride by comparing George to a boy, thus for George to earn her father's respect she must behave in a masculine manner. The examples suggest that, according to Uncle Quentin, boys are better than girls. Here it is difficult not to assume that Blyton is reinforcing the widespread social viewpoint that supports male dominance.

While Blyton appears to promote some emergent and alternative discourses about female independence in her portrayal of George, these discourses are contradicted by her portrayal of ways of being valued by her society. In the *Famous Five* stories male characters are placed in a position of privilege and power. George appears to have power and authority only because she behaves in a masculine manner, not because, as a girl, she is equal to the boys.

3.3 Anne

With regard to the gender behaviour of both adult and child characters, I believe that, with the exception of George, Blyton largely portrayed the patriarchal heteronormative gender roles of the time in which she wrote. This is an indication of Blyton's assimilation of the socially acceptable behaviour and opinions of the time. Accusations of sexism in Blyton's writing stem from the portrayal of passive and submissive female characters who are often involved in stereotypical female domestic roles, like cooking and cleaning; mothers are usually found in the kitchen and involved in such domestic activities, while men and boys are dominant, independent and in control. Heteronormative gender roles are reinforced through the presentation of women as the physically weaker sex who requires protection from physically more powerful men.

Blyton reinforces gender-biased discourses by portraying older male characters like Julian as leaders and young female characters like Anne as being dependent. The character of Anne conforms to a number of the dominant discourses about the stereotypically feminine. She is physically small and dainty and requires 'protection' from the male characters, thus reinforcing their superiority. These physical characteristics allow Blyton to develop Anne's stereotypically gendered role – she is often afraid and not ashamed to say so. She also enjoys her feminine domestic role of playing house.

Blyton often has Anne express her fears through her actions: "Anne slipped her arm through Julian's. She felt rather small and scared" (Blyton [1942] 1967:62); "Anne slipped her hand into Dick's. She felt scared" (Blyton [1942] 1967:117); "Anne began to cry" (Blyton [1943] 1967:84). There are also a number of occasions where Anne chooses not to join the other characters in the more dangerous activities. In *Five on Kirrin Island Again* Julian tells Anne that she may not accompany the others to capture the villains:

> "Anne, you're not to come," said Julian, to his little sister. "You're to go back and tell Aunt Fanny what's happened. Will you do that?"
> "Yes. I don't want to come," said Anne.
>
> (Blyton [1947] 1967:167)

However, what is significant in the above extract is that Anne accepts her submissive position and chooses not to go along with the others. This is also evident in *Five Run Away Together* when Anne decides not to go with the other children into the dungeon.

> "I think perhaps I'll stay up here with Timothy", said Anne, suddenly. She didn't like the dark look of the dungeon entrance. "You see, George – Timmy might be frightened or lonely up here by himself."
> The others chuckled. They knew Anne was frightened.
>
> (Blyton [1944] 1967:131)

Blyton also has Anne remark: “I don’t think I’m a very adventurous person, really” (Blyton [1946] 1967:76), and that she would rather occupy her time with typical feminine tasks than become involved in the adventure:

> Anne was torn between wanting to go with the others, and longing to play ‘house’ again. She did so love arranging everything and making the beds and tidying up the cave. In the end she said she would stay and the others could go.
>
> (Blyton [1944] 1967:138)

As a result of Anne’s showing fear when the children in the *Famous Five* adventures become involved in dangerous activities, the male characters conform to stereotypical masculine roles and offer protection to this ‘weaker’ female. In *Five on a Treasure Island,* when Dick and Anne attempt to rescue George and Julian, who have been locked in a dungeon by the villains Anne suggests that they try to get into the dungeon by going down the well. However, Dick will not allow Anne to take the risk: “Well,” said Dick, “I’ll try it – but not you, Anne. I’m not going to have you falling down that well” (Blyton [1942] 1967:141). It is of interest to note that George also fills the role of protective male, again reinforcing her desire to fill a masculine role.

> “Do you really think they are dangerous?” asked Anne rather afraid.
> “Yes, I should think so,” said Julian. “But you needn’t worry, Anne. You’ve got me and Dick and Tim to protect you.”
> “I can protect her too,” said George, indignantly. “I’m as good as a boy any day!”
> “Yes, you are, really,” said Dick. “In fact, you’re fiercer than any boy I know!”
>
> (Blyton [1943] 1967:147)

Blyton reinforces socially acceptable feminine behaviour by portraying stereotypical feminine domestic activities in a positive light: Anne is presented as enjoying domestic chores and activities. In *Five Run Away Together* the children live in a cave on Kirrin Island. Anne undertakes the domestic role of making the cave into a ‘home’.

> “Let’s arrange everything very nicely in the cave,” said Anne, who was the tidiest of the four, and always liked to play at ‘homes’ if she could. “This shall be our house, our home. We’ll make four proper beds. And we’ll each have our own place to sit in.

> And we'll arrange everything tidily on that big stone shelf there. It might have been made for us."
> "We'll leave Anne to play 'houses' by herself," said George, who was longing to stretch her legs again. "We'll go and get some heather for beds."
>
> (Blyton [1944] 1967:109-110)

> [Julian] could hear Anne singing down in the cave as she tidied up her 'house'. Her voice came through the cave-roof hole, rather muffled. Julian smiled. He knew Anne was enjoying herself thoroughly.
>
> (Blyton [1944] 1967:110-111)

> Anne had a very happy morning. She arranged everything beautifully on the shelf – crockery and knives and forks and spoons in one place – saucepan and kettle in another – tins of meat next, tins of soup together, tins of fruit piled on top of one another. It really was a splendid larder and dresser!
> She wrapped all the bread up in an old tablecloth they had brought, and put it at the back of the cave in the coolest place she could find. The containers of water went there too, and so did all the bottles of drinks.
> Then the little girl set to work to make the beds. She decided to make two nice big ones, one on each side of the cave.
>
> (Blyton [1944] 1967:111-112)

This domestic role is also evident in *Five Go off in a Caravan* when Anne keeps the caravan neat and clean:

> "I shall keep everything very clean," said Anne. "You know how I like *playing* at keeping house, don't you Mother – well, it will be real this time. I shall have two caravans to keep clean, all by myself."
> "All by yourself!" said her mother. "Well, surely the boys will help you – and certainly George must."
> "Pooh, the boys!" said Anne. "They won't know how to wash and dry a cup properly – and George never bothers about things like that. If I don't make the bunks and wash the crockery, they would never be made or washed, I know that."
>
> (Blyton [1946] 1967:26)

Readers are repeatedly told that Anne enjoys playing at "houses" (Blyton [1944] 1967:110) and feels pride when she is praised for success in chores such as "housekeeping" (Blyton [1946] 1967:39). The highest praise that the other characters can give to Anne is to refer to her as good housewife.

> [Julian] looked round admiringly. "My word, Anne – the cave does look fine! Everything in order and looking so tidy. You are a good little girl."
> Anne was pleased to hear Julian's praise, though she didn't like him calling her a little girl.
>
> (Blyton [1944] 1967:112)

This domestic behaviour is portrayed as normal and natural feminine behaviour and Blyton portrays Anne as seeking to conform to this behaviour. Unlike George, Anne is not successful at traditionally more 'masculine' tasks, like keeping watch:

> "Isn't she a good little house-wife!" said Julian, in great admiration. "She may go to sleep when she's look out, but she's wide-awake enough when it comes to making a house for us out of a cave."
>
> (Blyton [1944] 1967:115)

While Anne takes pride in her domestic prowess, Blyton has George feel guilty that she does not play more of a domestic role. George does not regulate her behaviour and does not seek to conform to the social gender role expectations. George's feelings of guilt are a result of her social knowledge about what is considered acceptable feminine behaviour by society, and her knowledge that she does not conform to these conventions. In contrast with George's feelings of guilt, Blyton does not mention any guilt feelings among the boys, because boys were not expected to participate in domestic tasks:

> "I like this holiday better than any we've ever had" said Anne, busily cooking something in a pan. "It's exciting without being adventurous. And although Julian thinks he's in charge of us, *I* am really! You'd never get your bunks made, or your meals cooked, or the caravans kept clean if it wasn't for me."
> "Don't boast!" said George, feeling rather guilty because she let Anne do so much.
> "I'm not boasting!" said Anne, indignantly. "I'm just telling the truth. Why, you've never even made your own bunk once, George. Not that I mind doing it. I love having two houses on wheels to look after."
> "You're a very good little housekeeper," said Julian. "We couldn't possibly do without you!"
> Anne blushed with pride. She took the pan off the camp-fire and put the contents on to four plates. "Come along!" she called, in a voice just like her mother's. "Have your meal while it's hot."
>
> (Blyton [1946] 1967:39-40)

Even though Blyton presents George's rebellion against conventional gender roles, it is significant that in *Five Go off in a Caravan* Blyton has Anne's mother insist that George "must" (Blyton [1946] 1967:26) help Anne with the domestic tasks of keeping the caravans clean and tidy, obviously because George is a girl. Thus, in this example, Blyton is firmly

reinforcing the dominant perceptions of how girls and women should behave. Similarly, in *Five Go off to Camp* Anne tells George that she "must help with the preparing of the meals and washing-up" (Blyton [1948] 1967:27), even though George "hated doing all the things that girls had to do, such as making beds and washing-up" (Blyton [1948] 1967:27). Blyton also seems to assume that it is expected of girls to participate in domestic activities by her comment on "the things that girls *had* to do" (Blyton [1948] 1967:27). This heteronormative behaviour is further emphasised by Blyton when the boys offer to help with domestic tasks and Anne insists that she and George are responsible for these tasks:

> "Shall we help you clear up, Anne?" [said Julian.]
> "No. That's my job and George's," said Anne firmly.
>
> (Blyton [1948] 1967: 81)

Further emphasising Anne's femininity, and in contrast with George's name, short hair and boy's clothes, Anne is portrayed as a 'girly' girl. Laura Barton remarks that "Enid Blyton's *Famous Five* girls provided a neat delineation of the type of girl you were: an Anne or a George" (2007:31).

> The two girls stared at one another for a moment.
> "Don't you simply hate being a girl?" asked George.
> "No, of course not," said Anne. "You see – I like pretty frocks – and I love my dolls – and you can't do that if you're a boy."
> "Pooh! Fancy bothering about pretty frocks," said George, in a scornful voice. "And dolls! Well you *are* a baby, that's all I can say."
> Anne felt offended. "You're not very polite," she said.
>
> (Blyton [1942] 1967:18)

Not only is Anne portrayed as playing with dolls,

> "Anne wanted to take all her fifteen dolls with her last year," said Dick, "Do you remember, Anne? Weren't you funny?"
> "No I wasn't," said Anne, going red. "I love my dolls, and I just couldn't choose which one to take – so I thought I'd take them all. There's nothing funny about that."
>
> (Blyton [1942] 1967:10)

but she is also interested in more feminine activities, like picking flowers:

> "Well, while the boys are looking for arrow-heads we'll look for primroses," said Anne, pleased. "I like picking flowers."
>
> (Blyton [1947] 1967:70)

Throughout the *Famous Five* series there are several examples where Blyton illustrates the differences between Anne and George.

> "George can do anything in the water," said Anne, admiringly. "I wish I could dive and swim like George. But I never shall."
>
> (Blyton [1944] 1967:107)

> "George and Anne pulled out the dolls. They were lovely ones. Anne cuddled them up to her. She loved dolls, though George scorned them."
>
> (Blyton [1944] 1967:152)

By highlighting the distinction between Anne and George as female characters, Blyton presents contrasting gender stereotypes. In this way, Blyton offers readers an opportunity to identify with the different aspects of these female characters: she reassures female readers that, while it is acceptable to be a tomboy like George, it is also acceptable to be domestic and feminine like Anne.

Anne conforms to gender role expectations and in the characterisation of Anne, Blyton shows evidence of how the gender relations dictated by the dominant discourse become entrenched and are regarded as natural and normal by individuals operating in society. While the domestic environment and motherhood appear to offer women power, social conventions regard this as an acceptable role for women in confining and defining them it helps maintain the status quo. Individuals like Anne consent to a submissive role, and even monitor and regulate their own behaviour in an effort to conform to these social practices. In this way Blyton reinforces the prevalent systems of thought about appropriate gender behaviour.

4 CONCLUSION

While Blyton and Christie portray social conventions and expectations about heteronormative gender roles in a patriarchal society in their writing through the behaviour of their characters, and while they offer examples of stereotypical heteronormative gender behaviour, they also present alternatives to this behaviour, and explore some of the alternative discourses emerging at the time. Blyton presents an alternative in which girls participate in many of the same activities as boys do when they are solving mysteries, rowing boats and climbing trees. In the *Famous Five* books George is a successful, independent girl who can do anything that a boy can do. In the character of Miss Marple, Christie uses the widespread social expectations about elderly women to undermine the dominant discourse so as to place her in a position of power. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, in the writing of Christie and Blyton, “[w]omen can do, and they do” (Plain 2001:47) and these alternatives imply that, while women are often constrained by the dominant patriarchal discourse of the time, it is possible for them to ‘do’.

Yet, even though Blyton and Christie provide their female characters with an opportunity to exercise power within a male-dominated world, this exercise of power does not overtly threaten the status quo or challenge the patriarchy. Miss Marple conforms to the conventions because she appears to be a stereotypical elderly lady. Anne’s domestic role is portrayed in a positive manner and thus reinforces the discourse that promotes a domestic role for women. Even though George behaves like a boy, she is still a girl and thus she remains ‘other’ in relation to boys and men. Furthermore, by emphasising George’s desire to be thought of as a boy, Blyton is supporting the widespread social viewpoint of the time that promotes male dominance and the belief that boys are ‘better’ than girls.

While it is difficult to conclude whether Blyton and Christie opposed or supported the dominant gender discourses of the time, their writing does show evidence of an awareness of the alternative and emergent ideas operating in society. However, the exploration of alternatives to the dominant system of thought in their writing does not overtly challenge or resist the dominant discourse of the time, nor does it threaten the status quo in any telling way.