



“Mystery” Beyond Reason: Mr. Quin, A Revealer of the Powers of Fiction According to Agatha Christie?

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Abstract. The short story collection *The Mysterious Mr. Quin* has a special place in Agatha Christie’s work. In these stories where rational investigation opens up to the supernatural, Christie theorizes what is at stake in the desire to read and proposes an expanded conception of the detective story.

Critics tend to consider Agatha Christie’s fiction as more complex than first thought.¹ Beyond the case of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, her whole work is based on a desire to play with the expectations of the reader. These stories are not to be seen as purely logical games but as the narrative fictional works they are (see Pyrhönen). The character of Harley Quin, a living embodiment of the idea of “mystery” in the stories devoted to him, can be seen in this respect as a vehicle for a theoretical approach to fiction and its powers. Mr. Quin suggests that Christie’s writing could in fact be linked to the idea of the invisible, of exceptional powers insofar as they concern the ability to produce meaning out of nothing. It is all the more interesting to study *The Mysterious Mr. Quin*, first published in 1930 yet little analyzed (Cook, *Ghost* 89), and to reflect on the way it leads to renew the image of investigation in Christie’s work.

Christie’s collection includes 12 stories that were originally published between 1924 and 1930. Two other stories about Quin (“The Harlequin Tea Set,” 1926, and “The Love Detectives,” 1971) are not included in the book. Although the stories in the collection are not arranged in order of their first publication, the collection constitutes a coherent whole.

Marc Vervel is a teacher and researcher at the Université de Paris in France. His research concentrates on attempts in formula fiction to play with the reader’s expectations, revealing diverse and complex literary projects. His recent and forthcoming publications focus on Agatha Christie, Alexandre Dumas, Thomas de Quincey, Edgar Allan Poe, the origins of the detective novel, and the word mystery and its complex relationships to literary history.