‘They raise demons and people die’: Gothic, Cosy Crime and National Identity in *The Pale Horse* (2020)

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Abstract:

Upon its broadcast in 2020, many reviewers were dismissive of the BBC’s adaptation of Agatha Christie’s *The Pale Horse* (1961), citing the production’s inclusion of supernatural and occult elements as incongruous with the author’s work. Screenwriter Sarah Phelps has adapted five Christie novels for television, with all the productions dividing audiences and critics due to their deviations from the source materials. While *The Pale Horse* (1961) contains elements of folk horror and gothic, these elements are accentuated in the television mini-series and gradually dominate the novel’s rational crime narrative. This article argues that rather than being an inappropriate aesthetic choice, the two-part adaptation adroitly incorporates folk horror and gothic traditions to explore contemporary debates about British national identity, by examining how the ghosts of the past haunt the present, in response to a socio-political climate that seeks to shape cultural attitudes by evoking mythic notions of history. The first half of the article discusses the overlapping characteristics of gothic and crime narratives and examines how they are used to challenge the cultural expectations of Christie’s work and adaptations thereof. The second section discusses the adaptation’s use of folk horror to examine a contemporary cultural milieu of decolonisation, Brexit, and culture wars in which folk horror becomes a battleground for national identity.

Keywords: Agatha Christie; Sarah Phelps; folk horror; cosy crime; national identity

An all-star cast, pristine costuming, country houses, period cars, and the inevitable dead woman unveiled on a mortuary slab: the BBC’s 2020 adaptation of Agatha Christie’s *The Pale Horse* (1961) has all the trappings of a prestige television murder mystery. However, like her previous adaptations of Christie novels, Sarah Phelps’s screenplay for *The Pale*

Horse faced criticism for its liberal approach to transferring the source material to screen.[1] In his review of Phelps' adaptation of *The ABC Murders* (1936), *The New York Times* Television critic Mike Hale argued that "her method is extreme makeover, redoing Christie's plots and reshaping her sensibility in a lurid and ominous fashion" Later, Hale described the miniseries as "Phelps's most thorough teardown yet, and this time she's so suffocatingly revisionist that what's left isn't really Christie at all".[2] According to one online tabloid response, Phelps's writing is imbued with necromantic incantation with its potent ability to have Christie 'turning in her grave'.[3] Viewers were allegedly left 'baffled' by changes to the original text, in particular by the production's emphasis on gothic and folk horror, with one horrified broadsheet reviewer exclaiming 'this adaptation featuring murderous Wiccans is as unchristian as it is un-Christie-an'.[4] In this article, I propose that the two-part television adaptation uses a gothic lens to respond to a cultural moment in which a specifically English identity is increasingly defined by a mythic past. I argue that through its blend of past and future, urban and rural, cosy crime and Gothic, *The Pale Horse* explores notions of national identity, and that the production examines how the ghosts of the past haunt the present in response to a socio-political climate that seeks to shape cultural attitudes by evoking mythic ideas of history.

Though the novel contains the unrealised suggestion of the supernatural, the production written by Phelps and directed by Leonora Lonsdale transforms *The Pale Horse* into a hybridization of murder mystery and folk horror in which the Gothic corrupts the trappings of cosy crime stories. As critics were quick to point out, the narrative of the series bears only a superficial resemblance to the source material, an impulse in adaptation that Christie appears to prophesise in the novel itself: a character discussing changes to a play they have seen describes 'the eternal surprise of the author at what the producer has done to him'.[5] Reeling from the apparent suicide of his first wife, antique dealer Mark Easterbrook (Rufus Sewell) discovers he is included on a list of names found in a dead woman's shoe. When the other people included on the list begin to turn up dead of apparently natural causes,

Easterbrook attempts to discover the connection between them and him. All the clues point to the sinister supernatural powers of three women – Thyrza, Bella, and Sybil (Sheila Atim, Rita Tushington and Kathy Keira Clarke), living in a former inn – The Pale Horse – in a rural Surrey village However, it soon becomes apparent that the inhabitants of The Pale Horse are a cover for a much more prosaic crime. While my focus is on the television series, I will also refer to Christie's text at times to highlight changes. The first half of the article discusses the overlapping characteristics of gothic and crime narratives and examines how they are used to challenge the cultural expectations of Christie's work and adaptations thereof. The second section discusses the adaptation's use of folk horror to examine the contemporary cultural milieu of decolonisation, Brexit and culture wars in which folk horror becomes a battleground for national identity.

Adapting Christie

From the very beginning, *The Pale Horse* leads the viewer across a threshold into a disrupted reality. The opening sequence of the first episode depicts Mark's first wife Delphine (Georgina Campbell) visiting The Pale Horse to have her fortune told. The camera surveys the occult objects decorating the house: animal foetuses in jars, snakes, skulls and vials, all of which contribute to an atmosphere of unease. We witness past and present entwine as the sequence cuts back and forth between the fortune-telling and Delphine, later on, readying a bath for herself. As the three inhabitants of The Pale Horse examine Delphine's palms, the song 'My Dream' by The Platters begins to play on the soundtrack. The use of the innocent-sounding 1950s pop song to soundtrack the unnerving images unfolding is reminiscent of David Lynch's use of pop music in his 1986 film *Blue Velvet* (1986). The juxtaposition in image and sound forces the spectator to reinterpret the love song, which bookends the series. The words evoke an escape into a fantasy world, with the lyrics 'my dream, is a wondrous dream, […] my escape at night'.[6] Throughout the sequence the camera is in a continual state

of movement, tracking forward towards Delphine's face at the reading and along the corridor towards the bathroom door, but as Delphine carries a radio into the bathroom with her the camera stops. Whilst the song continues to dream of escape the audience arrives at a threshold it is not allowed to cross. The lights spark and go out and the viewer is left knowing this is a Christie adaptation with a difference.

In the four decades since her death Agatha Christie remains one of Britain's most well-known and best-selling authors. In addition to her novels and plays, fans of her work can enjoy numerous television and film adaptations, as well as Christie inspired video games, board games, puzzles, tea towels, and even tea. Public perception of her work is as much about Agatha Christie the brand as it is Agatha Christie the writer, with her detective novels being positioned in the *cosy crime* publishing trend. In a 2023 article discussing the Crime Writer's Association's announcement of a cosy crime category in their Dagger Awards, journalist David Barnett defined the trend as 'originating with Agatha Christie' and that 'cosy crime errs on the light side with minimal violence, sex and gore'.[7] In a BBC article from the same year Barnett associated cosy crime with the English countryside, stating that stories in the sub-genre incorporate 'murder mysteries [that] are often set against a typically English backdrop of, as former British Prime Minister John Major once extolled, "long shadows on county grounds, warm beer, invincible green suburbs"'.[8] These articles suggest a shared understanding of Christie's work of an idealised England, and it is this image that Phelps seeks to subvert by emphasising the Gothic in her adaptation.

As Merja Makinen notes, there has been a consensus that Christie's writings present 'a cosy, conservative Englishness inhabited by stock characters in a middle-class community, which is restored to order by the elimination of the murderer'.[9] This consensus has been reinforced by the successful ITV adaptations of the Miss Marple and Poirot stories,[10] with at least one series of the latter having 'been sold to every country in the world' according to the

channel.[11] When discussing the Poirot television series in the context of English heritage, Mary F. Brewer proposes that part of its success at home and abroad is in its perpetuation of a notion of Englishness rooted in nostalgia, that the series:

> appeals to viewers because it offers a comfortable experience, where the greatest challenge one faces is guessing 'whodunnit.' On a deeper level, it feeds into a contemporary longing among some segments of English society for a bygone and largely mythical England.[12]

Similarly, Alison Light observes that 'Christie's writing seems fixed in a mythic time, "a golden age" apparently outside history, familiarly evoked as 'that unforgettable never-never land of chintz and country houses' which she argues is in part due to the decision permanently to root Miss Marple in the post-war 1950s in the series *Agatha Christie's Marple* (2013-14), disregarding the temporal settings of the novels.[13]

This widespread association of Christie with English country cosiness has been increasingly challenged in academic work. In *Queering Agatha Christie: Revising the Golden Age of Detective Fiction*, J. C. Bernthal notes the recognition of 'something playful or even subversive in Christie's conservatism', and Light charts the critical reassessment and political readings of her work from early conservative readings onwards.[14] Makinen convincingly argues that Christie's narratives are far from cosy: rather than representing the unknown, Christie's killers are from within the communities the stories centre on. The killers are not strangers but friends, acquaintances, and family members and thus Christie's narratives destabilise notions of the domestic being a location of safety.[15] Similarly, Bernthal observes the recurring theme of destabilised identities, with character 'types' being unstable from novel to novel.[16] Susan Rowland has positioned Christie in the Gothic tradition, proposing

that ‘for Agatha Christie, the Gothic sublime can be a threatening state which detecting is meant to map and recuperate’; in novels such as *The Sittaford Myster*y (1931) the Gothic represents a transgression of ordinary social order which is restored through rational explanation.[17] Developing this argument, Taryn Norman labels the use of gothic conventions that are ultimately resolved by rational explanation as an ‘anti-gothic gesture’ used to distract the reader from ‘a repressed and deeply anxious subtext’ such as wartime anxiety.[18] Whilst recognising Rowland’s and Norman’s arguments about the use of a supernatural gothic veneer, Christopher Yiannitsaros, echoing Makinen, notes the ‘darkness, brutality, and evil found much “closer to home” that marks [Christie’s] true foray into the Gothic’.[19] Yiannitsaros proposes that the village settings found in Christie novels are gothic spaces marked by surveillance and violence. However, when the Christie novels that use a gothic lens are adapted, it is still usually used as a narrative distraction with the rational ending maintained. The 2010 television adaptation of *The Pale Horse*, which reworked the novel as an episode of *Agatha Christie's Marple*, inserts references to a local village celebration named *the burning*, which marks the anniversary of a witch trial, but the adaptation remains faithful to the novel’s denouement. More recently the 2023 BBC adaptation of *Murder is Easy* and Kenneth Branagh’s film *A Haunting in Venice* (2023) (a loose adaptation of the 1969 *Hallowe’en Party*) leaned into the apparently supernatural elements of their source material. Branagh and his screenwriter Michael Green especially grasped the greater freedom that drawing upon a lesser-known story affords to fully indulge in gothic excess. However, yet again with both these adaptations the gothic effect is not sustained to the conclusion.

In discussing her approach to adapting Christie, Phelps identified the disconnect between the perception of the novels and the novels themselves (using similar wording to Yiannitsaros), saying ‘it deserves a brutality. She deserves to be paid attention to as a writer, not just as a brand’.[20] Phelps uses this ‘brutality’ to challenge the nostalgic impulse inherent

in the search of the mythic time and Englishness that Light and Brewer discuss, often by expanding upon overlooked or forgotten details from Christie's stories. In Phelps' adaptation of *The A.B.C. Murders* (2018), such expansion manifested in bringing to the fore explicitly racist characters and streets lined with posters for Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists. The adaptation drew criticism for these depictions of racial tensions, with *The Mail on Sunday* labelling it as 'anti-Brexit propaganda'.[21] In that article, Professor of literature John Sutherland is quoted as questioning whether Christie's stories are 'elastic' enough to include themes of fascism. Yet those themes are, in fact, visible in Christie's work: her spy novel *Passenger to Frankfurt* (1970) explicitly references fascism, and Poirot faces xenophobic micro-aggressions and comments in several of the novels in which he features. Sutherland's argument appears rather to be based on an idealised image of the Poirot stories. I propose that *The Pale Horse* is a response to attempts to redact the past in order to better mould English identity. This adaptation, in contrast to the heightened realism of *The A.B.C. Murders*, expands upon the Gothic. Themes of the supernatural and witchcraft are suggested in the novel but later punctured by a rational explanation (as Rowland suggests); in the miniseries, gothic excess is much more pronounced and becomes a key device in subverting nostalgic notions of Englishness.

Gothic and Crime

In combining folk horror, Gothic, and crime fiction, the adaptation astutely recognises the overlapping concerns the three narrative traditions have around how the legacy of the past can haunt the present. In his landmark summary of gothic characteristics, Chris Baldick states that:

> For the Gothic effect to be attained, a tale should combine a fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space, these two

dimensions reinforcing one another to produce an impression of sickening descent in disintegration.[22]

For Baldick, the 'tyranny of the past' becomes a weight holding down those in the present, confining them to a physical space, and this impact of the past is a trait recognisable in crime fiction as well. As Lee Horsley demonstrates, crime fiction and the Gothic have a shared history; crime fiction emerged from late eighteenth-century Gothic novels such as Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), and later the gothic elements became overshadowed by the emergence of the rationalism of 'detective-centred narrative structures'.[23] For Catherine Spooner, discussing Walpole's novel, 'crime takes place at one remove, in the past, but has continuing and visceral effects within the present'.[24] This is a dynamic that is evident in much crime fiction, for example in the discovery of a corpse in the present that represents a murder in the past. In addition to the effect of violent and brutal occurrences, I would argue that another key component shared in by gothic and crime narratives is the dissonance created by the concealment or distortion of the facts around the event. This is exemplified by Edgar Allan Poe's short story *The Tell-Tale Heart* (1843) in which a murderer recounts their attempts to hide a dismembered corpse under the floorboards only to be haunted by the phantom sound of their victim's beating heart. The concealment of the crime becomes just as important as the crime itself. A murderer might disguise their crime by hiding the weapon used, disposing of their victim's body, or by casting suspicion on another person for their deeds. Thus, an alterity is created by this falsified reality in which another narrative of the past emerges, one that can destabilise understanding of the present.

[Figure 1 about here]

Figure 1. From the outside Mark Easterbook is a character associated with death, The opening sequence of the miniseries depicts his wife's death and Mark sitting in mourning next to her body. Source: BBC, Prime Video Screenshot.

In *The Pale Horse,* the suppression and attempted alteration of the past becomes a disrupting force that destabilises identity, particularly for the protagonist Mark Easterbrook. The screen incarnation is a radical reinvention of the mild-mannered Easterbrook of Christie's novel. He becomes a womanising antique dealer, evidentially affluent and living in a well-presented London flat.[25] At the mid-way point of the first episode, he is sat in his shop surrounded by objects from the past, but it is devoid of customers. While the lack of sales is potentially down to narrative efficiencies it contributes to the image of a man rooted in, yet indifferent to the past. His trade is the commodification of history, but he makes no real engagement with it; he is apathetic to the past but in true gothic fashion, the past is not apathetic to him. Perhaps befitting life in a country still suffering the effects of the Second World War, Easterbrook is a character haunted by the inescapable spectre of death. By the time he is introduced in *The Pale Horse* his first wife is dead and early in the episode he will wake to discover that Thomasina (Poppy Gilbert), the lover he has spent the night with, is also dead. Furthermore, death surrounds him through *mise-en-scène* and dialogue (Figure 1). The front pages of the papers display stories about the trial of SS officer Adolf Eichmann and anticipate the Cold War paranoia that would emerge later in the decade by pronouncing the end of the world. Inspired by these news stories a character flippantly tells him 'we're all going to die tomorrow', and for Easterbrook, it appears to be true. His inclusion on the list of names foretells his end, confirmed by his hair loss, which is one of the clues linking the victims. He becomes trapped in a liminal space in-between life and death that recalls Baldick's 'claustrophobic sense of enclosure'. The sense of entrapment is further compounded when being caught up in the murder investigation appears to trigger Easterbrook's past traumas. Cathy Caruth argues that 'experience of a trauma repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly', and for Mark, it manifests through nightmares featuring wicker figures and Thomasina's corpse while in another he is walking the corridor to the bathroom

in which Delphine died (Figure 2).[26] Delphine also appears in his waking life, entering the room during a party: a physical presence confirming the past's collision with Mark's present at a point in time when he appears to have no future.

[Figure 2 about here]

Figure 1. The wicker figure that appears to Mark during his nightmares. Image brightened. Source: BBC, Prime Video Screenshot.

The claustrophobic enclosure created by past and present colliding begins to destabilise and disrupt Easterbrook's identity. While far from a sympathetic character, Easterbrook assumes the central position in the detective-centred narrative as he undertakes an investigation into the origins of the list, though in a subversion of the role, he is investigating a murder yet to happen – his own. For Spooner:

> When Gothic and crime fiction coincide, the protagonist is often racked by guilt, obsession, paranoia, or other psychological disturbances, or his or her identity is misplaced or disguised. The protagonist's instability places the pursuit of knowledge enacted by the detective narrative under question, often surrounding the process of rational and moral judgment with doubt.[27]

While the spectator initially believes that Easterbrook is racked by the trauma of his first wife's suicide, this understanding is reconfigured upon the discovery that Delphine did not commit suicide. In the second episode, Mark has his fortune told at The Pale Horse and the experience induces a flashback showing him murdering Delphine in an unprovoked fit of jealous rage. The revelation complicates Mark's position as the detective figure in the narrative; he is both killer and investigator, and the reveal that he rewrote the narrative of Delphine's death to appear as suicide undermines him as a source of rationality. As noted above, destabilised identities are a reoccurring motif in Christie's detective stories and the

author continually played with the reader's expectations as to who was – and could be – the killer, perhaps the most famous example being Poirot novel *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926).[28] Here the collapse of Easterbrook's perceived identity is the first step in the breakdown of the adaptation's detective narrative in that the reveal prevents the expected restoration of social order and the instability in Easterbrook's role represents a further departure from the rational.

The destabilisation of identity extends beyond Easterbrook and becomes a defining motif amongst the characters associated with modernity, which serves to emphasise an urban-rural dichotomy in the production. Inspector Lejeune (Sean Pertwee), the detective assigned to Thomasina's death, is positioned as a grizzled and dogged investigator but ultimately emerges as irrelevant and is unceremoniously murdered off-screen. Hermia (Kaya Scodelario), Mark's second wife, presents herself as a dutiful housewife, but in the face of Easterbrook's emotionally abusive behaviour is barely repressing her simmering rage. She is depicted frenziedly stabbing a cushion, and daydreams about bludgeoning a guest to death for flicking cigarette ash onto the floor.

The most duplicitous character besides Easterbrook is a pharmacist named Zachariah Osborne who also finds himself on the list of names. Actor Bertie Carvel plays the role of Osborne in a register of comic ineptness: his long brown coat and the high-pitched lilt to his voice are reminiscent of the hapless Frank Spencer in the sitcom *Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em* (1973-1979). Throughout, Osborne attempts to position himself in the role of what Makinen describes as 'the useful idiot', the Hastings to Easterbrook's Poirot, steering the investigation towards The Pale Horse. The veneer of the comic performance makes Osborne's eventual unmasking as the murderer even more unnerving, alongside the casually cruel delivery of his confession. It is he who has been poisoning the names on the list, including himself and Easterbrook. Through Osborne's unmasking, the already blurred boundaries between

investigators and killers are further eroded. The revelations that both the investigator and his assistant are murderers blurs the line between the narrative being detective-centred or transgressor-centred, resulting in the removal of 'the rational detective presence to mediate the horror of the crime', especially with Lejeune's death.[29] In discussing the gothic origins of crime fiction, Stephen Knight states that early gothic texts 'realise the ambient mood of fear and doubt which the detective will exorcise'.[30] Here, however, it becomes clear that this exorcism of doubt is no longer possible when those in the role of detective are also themselves the killers.

The reason behind Osborne's hitherto success as a murderer is the narrative he develops around the killings. Osborne has been a killer for hire, approaching potential clients and offering them the opportunity to pay for him to bloodlessly remove their loved ones and relatives. He enables the dark desires of those who pay for his services by allowing them to believe it is death by curse: 'That's the point, isn't it? Making people believe,' he tells Mark after he is caught. The supernatural involvement somehow absolves those who hire Osborne of their sin. Osborne has been poisoning his victims with Thallium, a poison of which he says 'you can't see it. You can't smell it. You can't taste it. It's untraceable'. He creates his own folklore around the killings and his methods to disguise the act of murder. To the rational thinkers, the deaths are the result of natural causes, and for those open to the irrational, the blame rests with the three women at The Pale Horse and their arcane supernatural abilities.

Folk Horror

This cosy crime narrative is destabilised by gothic conventions, and is further corrupted in the miniseries by the introduction of folk horror into the diegesis. Adam Scovell, in his influential monograph *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange* (2017) theorises a narrative framework he names 'The Folk Horror Chain'. Using the 'unholy trinity' of *The*

Witchfinder General (1968), *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971), and *The Wicker Man* (1973) as his basis, Scovell proposes four key narrative markers of folk horror: landscapes, isolation, skewed belief systems and a summoning or happening.[31] In 'Defining Folk Horror' Dawn Keetley expands upon Scovell's framework and suggests that folk horror presents a culture clash between 'a version of normality stumbling into a "monstrous" tribe' in which the definitions of both and the divide between them are challenged by the narrative.[32] Keetley defines a second wave of British folk horror that begins in 2008 and includes films such as *Eden Lake* (2008) and *Kill List* (2011) and novels such as Andrew Michael Hurley's *The Loney* (2014).[33] I propose that *The Pale Horse* can be considered an addition to this wave, but also as part of a cycle of British television dramas that incorporate folk horror iconography into a murder mystery or police procedural framework. These include *The Dublin Murders* (2019), *Wolf* (2023), the Christie adaptation *Murder is Easy* (2023), and *The Red King* (2024).[34]

This hybridisation of murder mystery and folk horror is a particularly congruent combination which highlights the parallels and overlapping concerns between the genres. Scovell's conception of the folk horror chain can be equally applicable to the narrative structures found in Christie's novels. Often, they feature a group of people in a remote, self-contained, or occasionally isolated location; for instance, Miss Marple's small village of St. Mary Mead, a country house like Styles, or a mode of transport such as the Orient Express cut off by snowfall. Rather than ritual sacrifice, the happening afflicting these communities is a murder requiring the expert eye of an outsider like Hercule Poirot. In the final link of the chain, once the murder is solved there is the summoning of the likely suspects and a gathering for the detective figure to announce the murderer's motives, means, and identity. These correlations speak to the elasticity of Scovell's framework but also highlight that one of the 'unholy trinity' of films that he used to develop it, *The Wicker Man*, has the premise of

a detective drama: Robin Hardy's film follows police officer Sergeant Howie (Edward Woodward) arriving on the Scottish island of Summerisle to investigate a girl's mysterious disappearance.

If, as Brewer suggests, Christie adaptations have fed into images of a mythical England, then folk horror is well placed to examine the dissonance created by this nostalgic impulse to evoke a mythic national identity and to challenge the divide created by its portrayal against everyday reality. In the introduction to their edited collection *Folk Horror on Film: Return of the Repressed*, Louis Bayman and Kevin J. Donnelly aim to narrow the definitions of the genre and suggest that British folk horror deals with 'the dregs of the past that stubbornly remain, like a faint stain on history' and that 'in folk horror, the horror is already inside that community'.[35] This recalls Yiannitsaros's positioning of Christie's villages as isolated gothic spaces that work to 'unmask the dark, 'unhomely' core that lies buried at the very heart of the English "Home Counties"'.[36] The faint stain or dark core to which folk horror's renewed popularity has been commonly linked is the political and cultural disharmony created by Brexit - the 2016 referendum that decided Britain's exit from the European Union. Andrew Michael Hurley, author of the folk horror novel *The Loney* (2015), has suggested that the subgenre 'can be an antidote to the jingoism that arises when nostalgia is cut with nationalism' when used to explore romanticised images of the past.[37] Similarly, Scovell observes that 'Folk Horror unusually and accurately maps the nationalistic elements of post-Brexit Britain, perhaps explaining its recent prescience and rise once more in popularity'.[38] Mark Gatiss, who popularised the term 'folk horror', made the connection with Brexit when promoting the revival of the 2017 folk horror infused BBC comedy *The League of Gentlemen*, which he co-wrote and starred in.[39] Gatiss suggested that the original 1999-2002 run of the surreal sitcom, based in a fictional rural English village, was 'a premonition' of the referendum result, particularly one of its most quotable catchphrases –

'this is a local shop for local people' – which spoke of an insular distrust of outsiders.[40] Further, in the interview Gatiss invoked Benjamin Disraeli's description of Britain as 'two nations between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy'.[41] Though originally describing the contrast between rich and poor, it is equally applicable to the rural-urban dynamic found in *The Pale Horse*, and through exploring this dynamic the miniseries moves beyond responding to Brexit and towards current concerns around constructing national identity through culture wars.

The urban and rural are clearly delineated in *The Pale Horse*, with the rural presented as an arcane other to the urban. They are part of the same country but separate and isolated, each with their own apparently sinister traditions. When Mark discovers a bus ticket to Much Deeping in Thomasina's belongings, he decides to investigate the town and the connection between The Pale Horse and the list of names. On his first visit, the quaint village is deathly quiet with no one in the streets. The deserted village is eerie yet also peaceful and pristine and presented as a stark contrast to the bustling, litter-strewn depiction of London streets. Later in the episode, Mark makes a second trip to the village, this time with Hermia, who describes its name as 'pornographic', configuring the village as both profane and an object of mockery. This second visit coincides with the village's Lammas Fair, a summer pagan festival later adopted by Christianity. The roads this time are crowded with people in pagan style costume parading through the village. The influence of *The Wicker Man* is evident in these scenes. Several inter-textual motifs and visual similarities evoke Robin Hardy's film, as Figures 3 and 4 demonstrate. Members of the parade wear crude animal masks and carry effigies made from wheat and straw. Extending the similarities, the revelries even end with a sacrifice, though here it is a mock imitation consisting of the beheading of one of the effigies. The contrasting experience between the two visits presents Much Deeping, and by extension, rural

England as a paradoxical place. There is the idyllic real estate image of a serene English country village and yet also a menacing isolated community.

Figure 2. The Lammas celebrations in Much Deeping. *The Pale Horse* (2020). Source: BBC, Prime Video Screenshot.

Figure 3.: The inhabits of Summerisle in costume during the procession to the climatic sacrifice in *The Wicker Man* (1973). Scource: Studiocanal, *The Wicker Man The Final Cut* (2013), Prime Video Screenshot.

Both of these differing depictions, the arcane and the idyllic, are positioned as constructed fantasies of rural life. In the documentary series *Can't Get You Out of My Head*

(2021), released a year after *The Pale Horse,* filmmaker Adam Curtis proposes that a revival of interest in folk traditions, led by figures such as music archivist Cecil Sharp, emerged around the turn of the twentieth century as a response to a society troubled by its colonial past and uncertain future. For Curtis the English middle classes escaped into a 'dream image of England's past. One that still haunts us today. At its heart […] a vision of a natural order in the countryside, outside the city.'[42] Curtis suggests that the appeal of these myths was to restate a national identity of British exceptionalism without having to confront the violence that fuelled its colonialist expansion, nor the brutal working and living conditions of the city-based working classes. A nostalgic impulse to construct a mythic national identity remains evident in current cultural discourse in Britain, best exemplified by the reaction to the National Trust's 2019 publication of their colonialism and historic slavery report.[43] The report's historical interrogation of how wealth generated from the slave trade underpinned the funding of historic buildings in the Trust's portfolio was met by vitriol in sections of the British press and public, angered by this challenge to their 'dream image' of Britain.

There is an eeriness that derives from this impulse to create such mythic pasts by redacting unpleasant truths to bolster rewritten national narratives. Mark Fisher conceives the 'eerie' as 'a failure of absence or by a failure of presence. The sensation of the eerie occurs either when there is something present where there should be nothing, or is there is nothing present when there should be something".[44] Fisher applies this reading of the eerie to ruins and abandoned structures, he uses the example of Stonehenge, where the construction still stands but the reasons for its creation have been lost. [45] Similarly, it could be applied to British historic building, such as the ones under the National Trust's care: the building might exist but the history behind it apparently does not. In her study *Green Unpleasant Land,* which explores the British countryside's colonial past, Corinne Fowler suggests that the Gothic is a 'genre well suited to portraying a society in turmoil' and I suggest that it is equally well suited to

portraying a society trying to hide its turmoil.[46] Fowler describes the objections to examining the past too closely as follows: 'to revisit this aspect of the past is to falsify and corrupt history itself'.[47] The mythic images of England become a tyranny in which any attempt to examine them becomes seen as a corrupting force, thus in order to sustain an idealised national identity, the past must be suppressed.

Against this mythic English rural grounded in nostalgia, *The Pale Horse* presents the paganistic English rural of folk horror, and the inter-textual references to *The Wicker Man* make clear that this image is also a fabrication. The rituals on display for the Much Deeping Lammas Fair are not rooted in actual tradition but recycled past images from folk horror texts. The presentation of rural England is filtered through the lens of past filmmakers such as Robin Hardy, and as Mikel J. Koven notes *The Wicker Man* itself is not an accurate representation of ancient rituals.[48] In his conception of the 'folklore fallacy', Koven demonstrates the uncritical approach Hardy and screenwriter Anthony Shaffer took when accepting disputed sources as historical fact and incorporating the ideas into the film. One such source used by Hardy and Shaffer was *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion* (1890) by anthropologist James George Frazer, a text which Koven describes as 'fraught with a hegemonic and colonial bias' due to Frazer's flawed methodology.[49] From these foundations, the folk horror aesthetic depicted in *The Pale Horse* is one that has been constructed through a chain of intertextual references. This imagined construction of a rural tradition is most evident in *The Pale Horse* through the way Osborne positions the murders as being the result of curses cast by Thyrza, Bella, and Sybil.

Osborne's guilt reveals the involvement of the three to be a façade, and while Osborne as the culprit is in keeping with the murderer's identity in the novel, the adaptation removes the involvement of the three women at The Pale Horse who in the source text are co-conspirators. Thus, it emerges that two concurrent narratives have been playing out: there is

the murder mystery Osborne is at the heart of, but he has written in the secondary elements of folk horror and Gothic himself by involving the three women and the rural village. As Keetley observes, folk horror is invariably 'focused on unwitting outsiders who are brutally sacrificed after they stumble into a rural, pagan community', but *The Pale Horse* undermines this dynamic and subverts the links in Scovell's folk horror chain.[50] Akin to *The Wicker Man*, an outsider intrudes into the world of an isolated community, but in *The Pale Horse*, this community is instead witness to violence perpetrated by the outsider. The rural is co-opted by the urban, with the figures representing modernity appropriating the arcane to disguise their violence, which is a narrative that Osborne continually cultivates. He tells Easterbrook that the women are witches who 'raise demons and people die' and he makes corn dolls to place on Mark's car to fuel his belief that the deaths are the result of witchcraft.

A final twist in the story suggests that the three, however, do have supernatural powers. In the novel, Thyrza, Bella, and Sybil's identities are as duplicitous as Osborne's is; they perpetuate the myths around them, that they are witches with the ability to strike victims down with curses, to disguise the real method. On-screen, however, their identities are presented as stable, the only characters without a suppressed past or hidden secret. There are intimations throughout that they have supernatural abilities: they correctly predict Delphine's future and indicate they can see Easterbrook killed her. These abilities appear to be confirmed in the dénouement when Thyrza, Bella, and Sybil sit at the bedside of Hermia who is recovering in hospital after being poisoned by Osborne. While no words are exchanged between the four of them, the pensive look on Hermia's face suggests an understanding has been come to. Mark arrives back at his flat, the camera tracking behind in the corridor; on his doormat, he picks up a newspaper. Seeing the front page wipes the hint of a smug smile from his face: above his picture is the headline: 'Mystery Death of Antique Dealer'. *My Dream* begins again on the soundtrack and Mark looks up to see Delphine emerge from the bathroom

to pick up the radio, repeating the actions before her death. For Horsley 'detective fiction ultimately acts as a repudiation of the gothic' due to the way investigations eschew 'supernatural explanations, [and throw] light into dark recesses'.[51] In this final scene, though it is the Gothic that ultimately repudiates the rational explanation of detective fiction, sweeping away any expectations of a cosy drama. Returning to Baldick, the tyranny of the past that Easterbrook sought to suppress has trapped him by dooming him to continually repeat it.

Conclusion

The ambiguous note on which *The Pale Horse* ends is another change to the novel that apparently baffled audiences, but it is one I argue is apt to close the adaptation. For a text that focuses on destabilised identities the final one disrupted is that of the programme itself as it fully sheds the rationality of crime fiction to embrace gothic excess. While not entirely a success with audiences, *The Pale Horse* should be recognised for the adroit way it uses the gothic as a disrupting force to subvert audience expectations. The series playfully acknowledges the cultural understanding of what an Agatha Christie adaptation should be and the nostalgic image of England it should present. However, it begins to dismantle these from the outset. There is the rare sight in a period drama of litter on the streets and the deeply unsavoury characterisation of Easterbrook, a protagonist it is difficult for the spectator to root for. In the end, the production proves ultimately ambivalent to the murder mystery structure, with the whodunit aspect revealed by an accidental slip of the tongue, rather than through the uncovering of clues and expert deduction.

The promise of a cosy murder mystery is a façade that is gradually chipped away, and the promise that rationality will restore social order disintegrates rapidly, especially after the

discovery of Easterbrook's murderous past. For Easterbrook, the past is something to be suppressed and for Osborne, it is something to be reconstructed in order to manipulate people, but these new realities are so unstable they disrupt the structures around them. By expanding the gothic elements of the novel, *The Pale Horse* presents the mythical Britain perpetuated by some cosy detective-centred crime dramas as being on the same continuum as the one presented by folk horror narratives. When Easterbrook meets the three women of The Pale Horse for the first time, Bella challenges his claim to rationalism by countering 'we're all rational when the sun's shining. Different when it goes dark'. Her message chimes with the nature of socio-political discourse in twenty-first century Britain and how quickly political messages can seek to appeal to irrationality in order to preserve the myths a culture constructs for itself. However, *The Pale Horse* suggests that a society built on mythical images of exceptionalism and an idealised past faces an unstable future.

Notes

[1] As well as *The Pale Horse,* Phelps wrote another four Christie adaptations for the BBC: *And Then There Were* None (2015), *The Witness for the Prosecution* (2016), *Ordeal By Innocence* (2018) and *The ABC Murders* (2018).

[2] Mike Hale 'Review: In Amazon's 'ABC Murders,' John Malkovich Is a Sad Poirot'. *The New York Times*, 1 February 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/01/arts/television/abc-murders-review-john-malkovich-poirot.html

[3] Stephanie Linning, 'Agatha Christie fans are left baffled by a VERY confusing supernatural twist at the end to BBC adaptation of The Pale Horse - and claim the author would be "turning in her grave"'. *MailOnline*, 17 February 2020. www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-8012869/Pale-Horse-viewers-left-baffled-confusing-end-Agatha-Christie-adaptation.html

[4] Suzi Feay, "Rufus Sewell stars in Agatha Christie's The Pale Horse on BBC1/Amazon Prime". *Financial Times*, 7 February 2020. www.ft.com/content/5f725862-4759-11ea-aeb3-955839e06441

[5] Agatha Christie, *The Pale Horse* (Collins Crime Club, 1961), 46.

[6] The Platters. *My Dream.* Wing Records, 1960.

[7] David Barnett 'Dagger awards adds categories for 'cosy crime' and psychological thrillers' *The Guardian*, 3 November 2023 https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/nov/03/dagger-awards-adds-categories-for-cosy-and-psychological-thrillers

[8] David Barnett 'Cosy crime' novels: Are they brilliant entertainment or 'twee and insipid'?' BBC, 22 September 2023 https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20230921-cosy-crime-novels-are-the-reading-choice-of-the-moment-but-are-they-brilliant-entertainment-or-twee-and-insipid

[9] Merja Makinen, 'Agatha Christie (1980-1976)' in *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. Lee Horsley and Charles J. Rzepka (Wiley-Blackwell 2010), 416.

[10] *The Pale Horse* is significant in the Christie canon in that it is one of the intersections between the worlds of Marple and Poirot that suggests the characters exist in the same fictional universe. It features Poirot's novelist friend Ariadne Oliver and the character Maud Calthrop who appears in the Marple story *The Moving Finger* (1942).

[11] Nick Clark, '25 years, 70 episodes, 700 million viewers: Suchet hangs up his homburg'. *The Independent*, 01 November 2013. www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/features/25-years-70-episodes-700-million-viewers-suchet-hangs-his-homburg-8918419.html

[12] Mary F. Brewer, 'Exporting Englishness: ITV's Poirot' in *Contemporary British Television Crime Drama: Cops on the Box*, ed. Ruth McElroy (Routledge, 2016), 75.

[13] Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity and Conservatism between the Wars* (Routledge, 1991), 62.

[14] J. C. Bernthal, *Queering Agatha Christie: Revisiting the Golden Age of Detective Fiction* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 1.

[15] Makinen, 'Agatha Christie', 417.

[16] Bernthal, *Queering Agatha Christie*, 2.

[17] Susan Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell: British Women Writers in Detection and Crime Fiction* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2000), 116.

[18] Taryn Norman, 'Gothic Stagings: Surfaces and Subtexts in the Popular Modernism of Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot Series', *Gothic studies* 18, no. 1 (2015): 89. Available at: https://doi.org/10.7227/GS.0007

[19] Christopher Yiannitsaros, 'Unhomely Counties: Gothic Surveillance and Incarceration in the Villages of Agatha Christie," *Gothic Studies* 23, no. 1 (2021): 69. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3366/gothic.2021.0079

[20] Jake Kanter, 'Writer Sarah Phelps On Her Final Agatha Christie Adaptation "The Pale Horse" & Why A Big-Money Overall Deal Would Be "Scary"'. *Deadline*, 15 April 2020. www.deadline.com/2020/04/sarah-phelps-interview-the-pale-horse-1202908068

[21] Chris Hastings, 'BBC's new Poirot story 'is turned into anti-Brexit propaganda' by writers who have built on racial tensions that "barely feature" in the novel'. *The Mail on Sunday,* 23 December 2018. www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6523851/BBCs-new-Poirot-story-turned-anti-Brexit-propaganda-writers.html

[22] Chris Baldick, 'Introduction' in *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales*, ed. Chris Baldick (Oxford University Press, 1992.), xix.

[23] Lee Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 4.

[24] Catherine Spooner, 'Crime and the Gothic' in *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. Lee Horsley and Charles J. Rzepka (John Wiley & Sons. 2010), p. 245

[25] This career change is a potential reference to the character Michael Rogers film adaptation of *Endless Night*, who transforms himself into an antiques dealer. Both the film and Christie's original 1967 novel contain folkloric elements with the plot involving an alleged gypsy curse and Michael, like Mark, is a character with an unstable identity.

[26] Cathy Caruth. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2007), 2

[27] Spooner, 'Crime and the Gothic', 250.

[28] In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* the killer is revealed to be the novel's narrator who has assumed the Poirot's sidekick.

[29] Spooner, 'Crime and the Gothic', 248.

[30] Stephen Knight, *Crime Fiction Since 1800: Detection, Death, Diversity*. 2nd ed. (Macmillan Education, 2010) 20.

[31] Adam Scovell, *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange* (Auteur, 2017), 16-19.

[32] Dawn Keetley, 'Defining Folk Horror', *Revenant*, no. 5 Folk Horror (2020): 23 https://www.revenantjournal.com/contents/introduction-defining-folk-horror-2/

[33] Keetley, "Defining Folk Horror", 2.

[34] *The Dublin Murders* (2009) was another Phelps adaptation that combined the Tana French novels *In the Woods* (2009) and *The Likeness* (2000). *Wolf* is based on Mo Hayder's 2014 novel of the same name, adapted by Megan Gallagher. *The Red King* is an original drama created by Toby Whithouse. I must also acknowledge the 2004 episode of the long running ITV detective drama *Midsommer Murders*, 'The Straw Woman', which revolves around the murder of a reverend who is burnt alive inside a straw effigy.

[35] Louis Bayman and K. J. Donnelly, eds., *Folk Horror on Film: Return of the British Repressed* (Manchester University Press, 2023) 4, 6.

[36] Yiannitsaros, 'Unhomely Counties', 17.

[37] Andrew Michael Hurley, 'Devils and debauchery: why we love to be scared by folk horror'. *The Guardian*, October, 28. 2019. www.theguardian.com/books/2019/oct/28/devils-and-debauchery-why-we-love-to-be-scared-by-folk-horror.

[38] Adam Scovell, 'Brexit-Is-Iccumen-In: The Wicker Man And Britain Today'. The Quietus, 10 March 2017. www.thequietus.com/articles/21954-wicker-man-article.

[39] Mark Gatiss popularised the name of the subgenre with his 2010 documentary series *A History of Horror* While Gatiss popularised the term of folk horror, in *'Defining Folk Horror'* Keetley traces the use of the term back to a 1970 piece written about *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971) in trade magazine Kine Weekly. Keetley, 'Defining Folk Horror', 1.

[40] Arifa Akbar 'Mark Gatiss: "The League of Gentlemen was a premonition of Brexit"'. The Guardian, 2 November 2018. www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/nov/02/mark-gatiss-the-league-of-gentlemen-was-a-premonition-of-brexit.

[41] Akbar, 'Mark Gatiss'.

[42] *Can't Get You Out of My Head*, 'Part Five – The Lordly Ones,' Dir. Adam Curtis, 2021, BBC.

[43] The report, compiled by Sally-Anne Huxtable, Corinne Fowler, Christo Kefalas, and Emma Slocombe can be read here: https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/who-we-are/research/addressing-our-histories-of-colonialism-and-historic-slavery

[44] Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*. 4th ed. (Repeater, 2016), 61.

[45] Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*. 62-63

[46] Corinne Fowler, *Green Unpleasant Land: Creative Responses to Rural England's Colonial Connections* (Peepal Tree Press Ltd, 2002), 144.

[47] Fowler, *Green Unpleasant Land*, 22

[48] Mikel J. Koven, 'Folklore Fallacy: A Folkloristic/Filmic Perspective on *The Wicker Man*', *Fabula* 48, no 3. (2006): 270-280.

[49] Koven, 'The Folklore Fallacy', 270.

[50] Dawn Keetley, "Dislodged Anthropocentrism and Ecological Critique in Folk Horror: From 'Children of the Corn' and The Wicker Man to 'In the Tall Grass' and Children of the Stones," *Gothic Nature* 2 (2021), 13.
https://gothicnaturejournal.com/issue-2/

[51] Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, 4.