

INVITATIONAL RHETORIC AND GOSSIP:
A FEMINIST RHETORICAL READING OF AGATHA CHRISTIE'S JANE MARPLE

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by
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Abstract

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The works of popular mystery writer Agatha Christie maintain the traditional nature of classic British mystery fiction. While seeming to adhere to the general conservatism of the genre in the first half of the twentieth century, some of Christie's texts obliquely defy male dominance through rhetorical strategies aligned with women. A feminist rhetorical approach indicates that one of Christie's most popular detectives, the elderly Jane Marple, solves crimes by successfully employing the tools of invitational rhetoric and gossip, thereby engaging with a feminist rhetorical agenda in her reliance on alternative rhetorical modes. Because invitational rhetoric—based in feminist principles— and gossip--peripheral discourse utilized by women and other marginalized groups—defy traditional rhetorical standards, their use indicates a rebellion against hegemonic convention. Through an examination of several Marple novels, I maintain that Christie accommodates expectations of genre and society while also subverting them through the rhetoric of those texts.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

According to her American publishers, Harper Collins, Agatha Christie “is the most widely published author of all time and in any language, outsold only by the Bible and Shakespeare. Her books have sold more than a billion copies in English and another billion in a hundred foreign languages” (as noted in the “About the Author” page inside the cover of *A Murder is Announced*). Christie’s works maintain the traditional nature of classic British mystery fiction, a genre sometimes criticized for its conservatism and preservation of the status quo. In his contribution to Howard Haycraft’s 1946 *The Art of the Mystery Story*, Nicholas Blake notes that upper-class readers of mystery fiction “have a stake in the social system and must, therefore, even in fantasy, see the ultimate triumph of their particular social values ensured” (401). Describing British interwar-era mysteries, Victoria Stewart explains that “detective fiction, especially of the ‘Golden Age’ variety, is condemned as conservative and resistant to change,” likely because it was a comforting defense of convention and custom in rapidly changing post-World War I society (102). Not only do Christie’s texts follow the attitudes of the age, her work generally adheres to genre conventions.

Typically, her works also respect the sort of genre specifications defined in W.H. Auden’s “The Guilty Vicarage.” According to Auden, such tales recognize the requirements of a closed, apparently innocent, society for the human milieu, a natural milieu that is “the Great Good Place” (151), a victim who is nasty enough to generate plenty of suspects but whose death makes everyone feel guilty, a murderer, and suspects who, while appearing innocent, have sufficient reason to behave suspiciously. Finally, a detective, whose job it is “to restore the state of grace” (Auden 154), returns the community to its pre-murder status.

While Christie's work fits this pattern, Marty S. Knepper suggests that "an examination of her sixty-six detective novels reveals that although there are anti-feminist elements in her writings, Christie obviously respects women and has feminist sympathies" (389). Knepper supports her argument with brief analyses of the characterization of women depicted in Christie's texts but admits "that Christie's female characters reflect her prejudice against women" (390). Like Knepper's scholarship, examinations of Christie's apparently contradictory attitude toward feminism center on literary analysis, rather than on rhetorical evaluations. Therefore, this study adds a unique perspective to the feminism/anti-feminism debate.

These variances demonstrate what may be considered Christie's discreet defiance beneath apparent compromise, paralleling the friction described by Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald as they write of the "tension between accommodation and resistance" (xviii) often at work within feminist rhetoric. While containing elements of the general conservatism of the period and of the genre, some of Christie's texts obliquely defy the dominance of male culture through rhetorical strategies aligned with women.

With this project, I utilize a rhetorical approach to demonstrate how Christie's popular elderly detective, Jane Marple, engages with a feminist rhetorical agenda, placing my study within the context of the existing debate on Marple's place within feminism. I maintain that, while Marple often appears as traditional and conservative as the genre within which she appears, the amateur female detective obliquely takes up the vanguard of rhetorical choices for women. Textual examination reveals that the "white-haired old lady with a gentle, appealing manner" (Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage* 13) frequently relies on the tools of invitational rhetoric and gossip, illustrating that women's rhetoric is both functional

and effective. As defined by Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin, “invitational rhetoric is an invitation to understanding as a means to create a relationship rooted in equality, immanent value, and self-determination” (5), with principles rooted in feminist ideals in defiance of “a patriarchal bias” (2). Gossip, on the other hand, has received “increasingly degraded connotations [which] follow its intensifying association with women,” according to Patricia Meyer Spacks who conceives gossip as an alternative rhetorical mode relied upon by women who have been historically restricted from public spheres of conversation (“In Praise of Gossip” 19). In signifying the success of feminized discourse in solving murder cases that male characters are unable to settle when relying on conventional and formal rhetorical modes, Christie contradicts established rhetorical standards, and Marple reveals a feminist focus, successfully utilizing avenues of communication associated with women but often regarded as ineffective or useless—despite Christie and Marple’s overt adherence to conventional generic and social expectations. Neither Christie nor Marple attest to any particular brand of feminism with the texts; it is not what they say, but how they say it which establishes a link to women’s right to speak and their right to speak in their own fashion.

Feminism and Rhetoric

Sociolinguist and women’s studies scholar Cheri Kramarae posits that “women’s speech is devalued” (xiii) and that “women (and members of other subordinate groups) are not as free or as able as men to say what they wish, when and where they wish, because the words and the norms for their use have been formulated by the dominant group, men” (1). Further, in the field of rhetoric, the conventional paradigm as defined by Aristotle equates rhetoric with persuasion. As Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald suggest, “the discovery of the available means was for Aristotle an act of invention that always assumed the right to speak

in the first place and, even prior to that, assumed the right to personhood and self-representation, rights that have not long been available to women” (xvii). With so few means with which to avail themselves, women often turn to other avenues of discourse. As Kramarae notes, one potential result of the subordination of women’s words is that women will often articulate themselves “by revising, getting around, and resisting the conventional communication system” (21). Therefore, women fashioning their own avenues of rhetoric and discourse is a feminist gesture.

Along similar lines of feminist challenge to hierarchical communication modes, Sally Miller Gearhart resists the traditional comparison of rhetoric to persuasion, urging a feminist rendering of rhetoric that repudiates control and domination. She cautions that rhetoric be translated into more productive and constructive modes of communication, modes associated with “the womanization of rhetoric” (195). Describing a rhetorical environment based in learning and growth, Gearhart writes, “feminism is at the very least the rejection of the conquest/conversion model of interaction and the development of new forms of relationships which allow for the wholeness of the individual and differences among people and entities” (200). In that vein, Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin offer their proposal for invitational rhetoric as an alternative to prevailing concepts of rhetoric, suggesting that this non-patriarchal mode of communication has its origins in “the feminist principles of equality, immanent value, and self-determination” (2).

Another rhetorical mode—discounted by male-normative society due to a customary association with women but also based on conditions of equality and safety— is the alternative discourse of gossip. Literature scholar Patricia Meyer Spacks suggests that women often remedy their male-prescribed discourse limitations through gossip because

“women inhabit the public realm on male terms” (Spacks, “In Praise of Gossip” 24) and thus must resort to alternative rhetorical modes. Kramarae states, “What could be, and probably is by many women, considered to be one of the most vital activities in the daily maintenance of life is often ridiculed by men as chit-chat” (17). While invitational rhetoric and gossip are rhetorical options for people of any gender, these scholars make the case that rhetoric which defies conventional, persuasive attempts to control is in fact feminist. Both discourse strategies are situated as feminist for their utilization by those who are subordinated and marginalized by male-normative society, often unable to avail themselves of dominant rhetorical means.

For the purposes of the current examination, a definition of feminist rhetoric can be drawn from Michaela D.E. Meyer’s expansion of Gearhart’s own explanation. Meyer outlines feminist rhetoric as “a commitment to reflexive analysis and critique of any kind of symbol use that orients people in relation to other people, places, and practices on the basis of gendered realities or gendered cultural assumptions” (3). Thus, an analysis of Marple’s rhetoric includes a focus on her gender which impacts rhetorical options, following Gearhart’s admonition to involve women’s discourse methods, which, like invitational rhetoric, do not revolve around the intent to change audiences but instead center on fellowship and intimacy, often fostered through gossip.

Meyer also classifies the analysis of women and rhetoric into two camps: those scholars who focus on “challenging rhetorical standards” and those who have been “writing women in” to the study of rhetoric, both groups shaking up what is accepted as a conventional text and even conventional rhetoric (1). With their anthology, *Available Means: An Anthology of Women’s Rhetoric(s)*, Ritchie and Ronald traverse the two categories of

women's rhetoric defined by Meyer, both incorporating women and confronting existing paradigms. While rhetoric never completely escapes Aristotle, feminist rhetoricians and scholars adjust his canons to include alternative strategies of communication, often ignored by mainstream rhetoricians. More recently, with *Feminist Rhetorical Practices: New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies*, Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch question the conventions of standard rhetorical study and describe the convergence of rhetoric and feminism, integrating the work of women into rhetoric, composition, and literacy. The authors focus on redefining historical paradigms through critical imagination, strategic contemplation, social circulation, and globalizing point of view (the titles of several chapters). In describing "the core agenda" of feminist rhetorical studies, Royster and Kirsch cite the three Rs, defined as "rescuing, recovering, (re)inscribing women into the history of rhetoric" (18). Previously disregarded women's communications have been salvaged and reclaimed as actual and genuine rhetoric.

Both examinations of women and rhetoric—Royster and Kirsch's and Ritchie and Ronald's—influence my rhetorical analysis of Marple. Perhaps "(re)inscribing" allows for creative new examinations of accepted, even popular, compositions by women, and into that arena fall the works by Agatha Christie. My review of Christie's Marple novels through a feminist rhetorical reading provides a unique perspective on existing popular texts. As Royster and Kirsch suggest, the evolution of feminist rhetoric requires "the concept of critical imagination as an inquiry tool" which often necessitates "rethinking what is there and not there" (20). Their perspectives of "critical imagination" and "strategic contemplation" (21) invite scholars to step back and re-view the historical and social contexts, authorial attitudes, and language of the texts themselves. The philosophy of "re-viewing" is

reminiscent of Adrienne Rich's "re-vision," defined as "looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (qtd. in Ritchie and Ronald 267). Therefore, my feminist rhetorical reading of Agatha Christie's Jane Marple and her rhetorical strategies exemplifies a "re-visioning" of a fictional female character existing in popular literature written by a woman author, seeing that character through a different lens than is customarily applied to popular mystery fiction.

In the past, questions of Marple's feminist nature—like Knepper's review of Christie's potential feminism—have been raised but primarily through literary analysis. For example, Mary Jane Jones argues in "The Spinster Detective" that Marple is one of several "spinsters" who serve merely to uphold social conventions, maintaining that such female characters "rely on intuition or on information drawn from social twiddle-twaddle," posing no threat to "masculine logic" (108). In a response article, Earl F. Bargainnier claims that Marple is indeed "a liberated woman" (113). He posits that Marple observes human nature, distrusting "mere surface appearance," and is "orderly and methodical in her approach to her cases," adding that the elderly sleuth is independent, fearless, and a bit manipulative (Bargainnier 118-9). Thus the conversation regarding Marple's feminist status exists but is not based on the character's rhetoric, except for this study. Such a rhetorical analysis relies on mounting the very challenges proposed by many feminist scholars as the discussion focuses on discourse strategies outside traditional standards.

One existing rhetorical study does specifically examine an Agatha Christie novel featuring Jane Marple. Eden M. Leone's 2015 dissertation for Bowling Green State University undertakes an examination of the character in Christie's *4:50 from Paddington*, making comparisons to the television series, *Bones*. In her study titled "Rhetorical Inquiry:

Feminist Argumentative Modes and Expectations in Detective Fiction,” Leone utilizes “heuristic analytical lenses” (ii) and investigates Marple’s epistemology within one Christie text. Like the current study, Leone’s project focuses a feminist lens on Marple and initiates a distinctive “re-visioning” of Christie’s work; however, Leone’s focus is on knowledge construction.

Invitational Rhetoric

Following Gearhart’s path toward non-controlling communications, Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin offer “Beyond Persuasion: A Proposal for an Invitational Rhetoric,” positing invitational rhetoric as an alternative to prevailing concepts of rhetoric. They maintain that “invitational rhetoric is an invitation to understanding as a means to create a relationship rooted in equality, immanent value, and self-determination” (Foss and Griffin 5). In aligning with these feminist ideals, Foss and Griffin’s notion resists a hierarchical arrangement of rhetor and audience. Further, they indicate that any rhetoric relying on a single perspective contains “a patriarchal bias” (Foss and Griffin 2). Given that the oft-professed perspective will be the one emanating from the dominant viewpoint, the suggestion and adoption of a substitute rhetorical strategy itself resists male control. Because, as these communication scholars explain, audience members are invited to see the world from the rhetor’s point of view without judgment, belittlement, or control, invitational rhetoric depends on *presentation* rather than *persuasion*.

As Gearhart speculates, the desire to change others or the environment is not violent or dominating; rather, she maintains, the intention to convert others to the rhetor’s perspective is a destructive force (196). Therefore, Foss and Griffin envision invitational rhetoric as a means to avoid persuasive domination. In their assessment, invitational rhetoric

allows “rhetor and audience alike to contribute to the thinking on an issue” (5), implying that rhetor and audience members alternate positions, allowing each to speak while the other(s) listens without privileging any single viewpoint. The fundamental goal of the “nonhierarchical, nonjudgmental, nonadversarial framework” of invitational rhetoric is that those who contribute to the conversation come to an improved understanding of each other as well as of subjects under discussion (Foss and Griffin 5). Rather than demean an audience or its beliefs as inferior and thus requiring change, such communication heuristics allow that the alternating speakers engage in specific behaviors that express equality and individual value.

Extending the theoretical premise of invitational rhetoric, Foss and Griffin identify this non-threatening communication strategy as achieving two forms. They indicate that “offering perspectives, a mode by which rhetors put forward for consideration their perspectives” (7), is a critical element of an alternative, non-persuasive version of rhetoric. While the rhetor may put forth a perspective, such presentation does not pursue support or acceptance and is therefore not intended to be adopted by audience members. While personal narrative is frequently employed in traditional rhetoric as evidence to support persuasion, narrative is utilized in invitational rhetoric as a means merely to explain the rhetor’s perspective. An additional aspect of “offering perspectives,” as elucidated by Foss and Griffin, is “a willingness to yield” on the part of the rhetor (7). The rhetor—alternating with members of the audience—provides a viewpoint but not one that is stubbornly entrenched in the rhetor’s beliefs; instead, the rhetor cooperatively accepts that she may desire to alter her own opinions.

Additional potential components of invitational rhetoric include nonverbal offerings and “re-sourcement” (9). Foss and Griffin posit that nonverbal facets of communication

relevant to invitational rhetoric include clothing and other figurative elements of representation, while “re-sourcement is a response made by a rhetor according to a framework, assumptions, or principles other than those suggested in the precipitating message” (9). They explain that re-sourcement involves re-framing the message from a new direction, an angle that extricates the subject from its original conduit of focus. Thus, within invitational rhetoric, the presentation of perspectives depends on respectful contemplation, non-persuasive use of narrative, and an openness to changing attitudes as well as nonverbal and re-positioned components.

According to Foss and Griffin, a second characteristic of invitational rhetoric is the “creation of external conditions that allow others to present their perspectives in an atmosphere of respect and equality” (7). This delineation of rhetoric directly collides with traditional patterns which rely on a power hierarchy of rhetor over audience. Again aligning with feminist rhetorical principles, invitational rhetoric instead provides “a feeling of security and freedom from danger [whether physical or intellectual] for the audience” (Foss and Griffin 10), thereby negating any sense of power or domination by the rhetor. Additionally, Foss and Griffin note that the “intrinsic or immanent worth” of audience members is recognized and respected (11); therefore, audiences are seen not as uniform masses but instead are perceived as individuals, each of whom is appreciated as a unique entity.

An aspect of external conditions appropriate to the acknowledgment of value is that listeners do not interrupt speakers or interject themselves when a rhetor offers and explains her outlook on an issue under discussion. Citing E.T. Gendlin’s term, “absolute listening,” Foss and Griffin extrapolate on the increased possibilities that a rhetor and/or a listener might better grasp their own understanding and viewpoint on the subject at hand by listening

quietly (11). Thus, an uninterrupted speaker is better able to fathom her own beliefs and convey them without interference from audience members. The offering of perspectives supports these external elements of invitational rhetoric through the exchange of speaking and listening by rhetors and audience members, without favoring any participants.

A third external condition supporting invitational rhetoric is freedom from restrictions. As Foss and Griffin explain, participants may interact without limitations to topic, and all are equally able to bring up subjects and perspectives for discussion. They clarify that “freedom also is developed when a rhetor provides opportunities for others to develop and choose options from alternatives they, themselves, have created” (Foss and Griffin 12). Freedom as an aspect of invitational rhetoric provides more space for new ideas and infinite solutions while traditional persuasive rhetoric stipulates a resolution based on the rhetor’s viewpoints. With invitational rhetoric, acceptance or adherence to the proffered outlook does not impact the rhetor—or her connection to the listeners—who remains detached from disappointment or offense by the audience.

Building on Foss and Griffin’s scholarship, Jennifer Emerling Bone, Cindy L. Griffin, and T.M. Linda Scholz confront criticisms of invitational rhetoric in “Beyond Traditional Conceptualizations of Rhetoric: Invitational Rhetoric and a Move Toward Civility.” The purpose of their essay “is to expand our knowledge of invitational rhetoric practices, as they exist in an increasingly diverse, complex, and interconnected world and to illustrate the ways that invitational rhetoric works to promote and establish civility in a variety of venues” (Bone et al. 435). Therefore, these scholars address specific criticisms made against invitational rhetoric. For example, challenging the complaint that invitational rhetoric is not appropriate for all circumstances, the authors maintain that Foss and Griffin never intended this rhetorical

style be deemed suitable for every situation, citing the original scholarship that claims invitational rhetoric as “a viable form of interaction in *many* instances” [emphasis added] (qtd. in Bone et al. 439). Another critique tackled by Bone et al. is that invitational rhetoric is available only to women in the face of masculine domination. While aligned with feminist principles, as Foss and Griffin explain, invitational rhetoric is applicable to any situation in which external conditions of personal equality, value, and freedom might be realized. In their essay, Bone et al. also discuss a concern that invitational rhetoric hinders individual power. They write, “the charge regarding a lack of agency and invitational rhetoric exists because, for some critics, there is no agency when no *effort* to change others exists” [emphasis in original] (Bone et al. 445). Examinations of Christie’s depictions of invitational tools lend credence to Bone et al.’s representations and defy many of the complaints against the non-persuasive, non-threatening communication style because it is through her rhetoric that the elderly sleuth conveys her own value and gains agency during criminal investigations.

Nina M. Lozano-Reich and Dana L. Cloud agree with the civility inherent in the use of invitational rhetoric and concur that it is suitable only in certain circumstances. However, with “The Uncivil Tongue: Invitational Rhetoric and the Problem of Inequality,” they maintain that the appropriate conditions rarely exist, suggesting instead that invitational rhetoric relies on “actual equality,” but that “such conditions of actual equality are rare in political controversy and interpersonal relations” (Lozano-Reich and Cloud 221). While invitational rhetoric may be useful in instructional settings and in situations of genuine equality, they posit that it is not a mode of communication useful for the oppressed who face material inequity. Rather than enter this particular argument of invitational rhetoric’s overall effectiveness in diverse circumstances, suffice it to say, that for the current examination of

Christie's Marple, the sleuthing character is neither physically nor materially oppressed. As an elderly, unmarried woman, Marple is a marginalized and undervalued member of her fictional community, reflecting the era in which Christie created her. While more options were becoming available to women in post-World War I Britain, Victorian sensibilities remained common among those who viewed "spinsters" as superfluous women because such unmarried women were "surplus to the needs of men" (Jeffreys 87). At the time of Marple's creation, women's value rested on their association with men. Despite such restrictive social circumstances, Marple is useful, even powerful, in her ability to return communities to their pre-crime, normative states.

Gossip

While invitational rhetoric is identified with women because of its foundation on feminist principles, gossip is also frequently associated with women but on negative grounds. The first entry for the noun in the *Oxford English Dictionary* relates "gossip" with a sponsor—a godfather or godmother perhaps—of someone being baptized. However, by the second entry, the word gossip correlates with "a familiar acquaintance, friend, chum" as far back as the fourteenth century. The dictionary's third and fourth entries—with early usages dating to the seventeenth century—overtly connect the term with the female gender, identifying "gossip" as "a person, mostly a woman, of light and trifling character, esp. one who delights in idle talk; a newsmonger, a tattler" or that person's conversation, consisting also of "trifling or groundless rumour; tittle-tattle" ("gossip"). Spacks also notes an initial meaning which associates the word with baptism. She indicates that one mid-eighteenth-century explanation identifies the word as "one who runs about tattling like women at a lying-in" ("In Praise of Gossip" 19). Because these later definitions imply a world generally

excluding men, Spacks suggests that the contempt apparent in later and contemporary usage is evidence of male fears of “the dangers they imagine in female talk” (“In Praise of Gossip” 20). While society might associate gossip with women, such “tittle-tattle” is considered genderless from the perspective of social sciences. In “If You Don’t Have Anything Nice to Say, Come Sit by Me: Gossip as Epistemic Good and Evil,” social epistemology and philosophy scholar Casey Rebecca Johnson relies on Tommaso Bertolotti and Lorenzo Magnani’s definition of gossip as “broadly evaluative talk” between two or more people, “comfortably acquainted with each other,” about another person they both know but who is not present (304), an overtly ungendered clarification. However, the fact remains that gossip is frequently linked to women—through definitions and connotations—and therefore may be rhetorically analyzed from a feminist perspective because, as a demeaned alternative discourse mode, gossip is utilized by marginalized groups, falling outside the realm of respected, rational male-normative rhetoric.

Spacks provides a theoretical lens through which such a female-focused analysis might be made. She posits that women often remedy their male-prescribed discourse limitations through gossip, noting that “women inhabit the public realm on male terms” (Spacks, “In Praise of Gossip” 24) and thus must resort to alternative, unauthorized rhetorical modes. Spacks indicates that the condemnation of gossip as superficial and trivial rhetoric has increased with its connection to women and is impacted by male privilege which preferences the “abstract, general, and theoretical” (23) over intimate and personal conversation. Philosophy professor and epistemology scholar Karen Adkins maintains that revising historical perspectives on gossip reveals that there is no actual split between “authoritative knowledge” and what is perceived as women’s epistemology (215). She posits

that it is a mistake to identify women's communications as more "narratively or emotionally directed" (215), suggesting instead that, rather than describe women's narrative knowledge as separate from male-dominated discourse, narrative and gossip are means through which all people gain knowledge and information. According to Adkins, gossip is a social form of knowledge construction, not based on gender, and the ways in which women gain knowledge are merely human ways of knowing. Adkins explains that gossip's many uses include the gathering of information, the construction of community unity, and the establishment of power.

Additionally, Johnson maintains that gossip's social role can be simultaneously positive and negative. The author suggests that as an evil, gossip can be restrictive and malicious; however, gossip can also enable "epistemic capabilities" (304). Johnson also clarifies her terminology by emphasizing the social nature of such conversation; "we are social creatures who are highly motivated to be included in groups, especially in groups that share social information – in other words, groups that gossip" (305). Addressing gossip's implications to literature, Spacks in her 1986 text, *Gossip*, acknowledges that literature is storytelling and is therefore analogous to gossip. Within the narratives of literature exists gossip which reveals the characters' stories to the reader; Spacks posits that "as subject matter, gossip impels plots" (7). Citing examples from literature to support gossip as meaningful and intimate conversation, Spacks explains that "novelistic narrators often arouse in readers the kind of intense interest in personal detail that gossip generates, and they may attempt to establish with readers a kind of relationship approximating that of gossip" (10). Adkins also defends the notion of gossip as storytelling, terming it "a subcategory of

narrative ... as intimate, usually collective narrative” (216). Both scholars identify gossip as a means to share stories, adding more personal perspectives to general information.

These depictions of gossip as a means for information gathering and for story sharing are particularly apropos to my analysis of Marple’s reliance on alternative discourse modes. Marple regularly engages in gossip, discussing with fellow characters the activities of others—gleaning details of a crime from chatting with maids and neighbors and contributing her own anecdotal tales about acquaintances whose behavior parallels those under investigation. Christie’s elderly sleuth behaves as a nosey grandmotherly woman is expect to act, but Marple turns those expectations upside down as she enlists such small talk to identify murderers. While she does not rebel against perceptions of gossip as women’s talk, Marple’s success defies conventional valuations of discourse when her investigations rectify communities disrupted by crimes of murder, providing a feminist example of operating effectively within existing social constraints to gain agency and effect social change.

Further, Adkins addresses gossip as “demonstrat[ing] the value of ideas and talk on the margins” (216). As Spacks explains, men dominate public spheres and therefore women are subjected to their terms. In “‘You’ll Think We’re Always Bitching’: The Functions of Cooperativity and Competition in Women’s Gossip,” Jackie Guendouzi contributes to this account by defining gossip’s social function as “backstage” talk for women (47), backstage because men dominate the rhetorical stage. Guendouzi elaborates on additional aspects of gossip as community discourse, describing the implications of gender stereotyping and communication styles and the nature of gossip and its modern association with women. Guendouzi further describes two variations on gossip which she terms “bitching” and “peer group news-giving” (29). Construction of gossip as a means through which those unable to

communicate in the foreground, or front of the stage as the author explains, is a relevant aspect of the manner in which women enlist gossip to both complain and gain information.

Pamela VanHaitsma supports Guendouzi's perspective of gossip as "backstage" talk, a means by which those unable to speak publicly and openly are able to communicate. With "Gossip as Rhetorical Methodology for Queer and Feminist Historiography," VanHaitsma reiterates gossip as a means for more marginalized members of a society to communicate and exercise some semblance of rhetorical power, a power often denigrated by heterosexual, masculine domination, thus positing gossip as a valuable perspective for analysis of feminist and queer historical writing. Citing Royster and Kirsch, VanHaitsma details the use of feminist rhetorical principles, and in describing the analysis of gossip as "rhetorical methodology" (136), the author's depiction of the key features of its study includes the reclamation of gossip as a positive form of rhetoric while acknowledging its negative connotations. VanHaitsma's discussion of "crucial feminist speculation" (137) is particularly relevant to a project on gossip and feminist rhetoric, as she explains that gossip is both a configuration of constructive rhetorical methodology but also a means of "speculation or imagination" (138).

Speculation, imagination, and knowledge are the results of much information sharing at a personal and intimate level. As Adkins elaborates, "gossip has until recently been castigated as women's foolish, petty, backbiting talk about others' personal lives. However, feminist theorists have recently sought to reclaim gossip as an important source of alternative value and information for women" (221). As an older, single woman, Christie's Marple frequently chats with her neighbors and acquaintances and is sometimes relied upon to be observant and knowledgeable about village residents and events—even murder suspects.

Through her personal contacts and her close observation of human behavior, Marple joins her society while still obtaining intelligence useful to the resolution of criminal cases. As Adkins states, gossip behaves epistemologically in two ways. She posits that “it helps us make connections between seemingly unconnected ideas” and “it helps us select out that to which we pay epistemic attention” (223). While many characters sometimes rely on gossip to judge and criticize others—Guendouzi’s “bitching”—Christie’s Marple utilizes gossip to share and obtain news and details interesting to her and helpful to the novels’ murder investigations.

Spacks describes these private and public aspects of gossip:

Gossip occurs at the same intersection [of the social and the individual], serving social purposes, defining social opinion, embodying social power (the power of opinion), but issuing from individual mouths and tracing psychic agendas as well.

Characters in realistic fiction locate themselves within or against a social context.

Gossip declares their status: inside, outside, indeterminate, or struggling to get or stay in. (*Gossip* 8)

Ultimately, within the contexts of three selected Marple novels, gossip revolves around the key points of community solidarity and knowledge-building and narrative communications as described by the aforementioned scholars. Marple as well as other characters rely on these attributes of gossip as a discourse mode which unites and informs them. Further, analysis of gender dynamics and the social power associated with gossip reflects Marple’s ability to easily negotiate the use of informal and intimate discourse, because, as she is wont to explain, ““one sees a good deal of human nature living in a village all the year round”” (Christie, *Moving* 215). Marple depends on her own understanding of human behavior to gauge the use and significance of gossip as rhetorical strategy.

While neither invitational rhetoric nor gossip are the domain strictly of women or of feminist study, both discourse strategies remain associated with women. Given that invitational rhetoric relies on the use of feminist ideologies based in respect and civility and that gossip is readily linked with the female gender due its personal and “backstage” nature, both rhetorical styles have been undervalued. However, examination of rhetoric that depends on the characteristics of both modes reveals their user’s ability to politely and personally establish bonds and acquire knowledge. These priorities are evinced by the discourse methods of Christie’s Jane Marple as the amateur detective confidently communicates with other characters in her efforts to resolve murder cases. Therefore, despite Christie’s overt adherence to mystery fiction’s generic guidelines, the author obliquely subverts the conventions of patriarchal rhetoric in permitting Marple to depend on feminist rhetorical constructs.

Selected Marple Texts

Agatha Christie’s Jane Marple originated in a short story, “The Tuesday Night Club,” appearing in the story collection, *The Thirteen Problems*, in 1927. Marple is an elderly unmarried woman who either encounters murder in her hometown, the fictional British village of St. Mary Mead, in other small communities, or in faraway locales such as the Caribbean. Ultimately, Marple appears in twelve novels and twenty short stories (“About Miss Marple”), evolving as a character with each appearance and eventually earning the esteem of male legal authorities.

Published in 1930, *The Murder at the Vicarage* is Marple’s first appearance in a novel. The story is narrated by Leonard Clement, the vicar of the Church of England’s parish at St. Mary Mead. When Colonel Protheroe is found dead in Clement’s study, the victim’s

second wife and her lover each confess to the crime. Through the vicar's eyes, Marple is established for Christie's readers. While she seems a minor character, Marple again solves the case in *The Moving Finger* (1942), a novel also told from a male perspective. The story begins with the injured Jerry Burton, the first-person narrator, and his sister Joanna renting a country house for his recuperation. Poison pen letters accusing villagers of a variety of sins harass residents, and soon the prominent Mrs. Symmington is found dead, alongside a suicide note. Another death occurs, and the police arrest the wrong person. The elderly sleuth has developed as a persona and is a stronger character by the time of her characterization in 1950's *A Murder is Announced* when she is actually relied upon by the male police establishment to help solve the crime. This narrative features a mysterious notice printed in the local newspaper, announcing the time and place of a pending murder. Once neighbors gather at the appointed hour in a country home, the lights go out, shots are fired, and a man is dead. For this text, Christie moves to third-person limited narration, having established Marple as a credible female crime-solving character through her previous literary appearances, no longer requiring a male storyteller to provide the elderly sleuth with ethos. Marple's rhetorical strategies—the tools of invitational rhetoric and gossip—are repeated successfully in the three novels.

Relying predominantly on the scholarship of Foss and Griffin, Chapter Two emphasizes Marple's use of the tools of invitational rhetoric in her early appearances in each of the three novels. Additionally, Marple's reliance on these tools during murder investigations and their relationship to male authority are examined. Marple's implementation of aspects of invitational rhetoric also refutes some of the criticisms against this feminist rhetorical strategy. This chapter supports my claim that Marple utilizes elements

of a non-traditional rhetorical technique, a strategy that rejects “the conquest/conversion model of interaction” (Gearhart 200), and replaces it with a mode that depends on safety, freedom, and value, emanating from feminist ideology.

Chapter Three turns to the significance of gossip as a discourse mode in the communities of the subject texts, focusing on Marple’s incorporation of gossip to solve murder cases. Three significant aspects of gossip—its association with gender, its power in society, and its position as backstage talk—are illustrated through the Marple novels, exhibiting many of gossip’s functions as described by Spacks, Adkins, Johnson, Guendouzi, and VanHaitsma. This chapter supports my contention that gossip—disregarded as useless and idle chatter because of its alignment with women—can be a viable rhetorical means through which those unable to speak publicly are able to access both community and knowledge, another feminist statement due to its consequences for women and other marginalized groups.

Chapter Four features a brief conclusion and possible implications of this study.

CHAPTER TWO

Invitational Rhetoric

Foss and Griffin posit that invitational rhetoric seeks mutual understanding, rather than the influence of audience by rhetor as seen in dominant, persuasive communication methods. Invitational rhetoric emphasizes presentation over persuasion within an environment of respect and equality, an environment supported in feminist ideals. Given these parameters, the use of the tools of this rhetorical style implies a rebellion against traditional, male-dominated communication modes. While Agatha Christie's depiction of Jane Marple predates Foss and Griffin's proposal defining invitational rhetoric, this analysis of the character's rhetorical heuristics suggests the elderly sleuth employs elements of this discourse style. I maintain that the limitations, male dominance, and social constructions of a small-town elderly busybody are disrupted because Christie provides agency and empowerment to Marple through feminist rhetorical strategies. Textual examples reveal Marple's development of ethos and reliance on tools of invitational rhetoric, associated with the feminist principles of equality, value, and freedom.

Introducing Jane Marple

Each of the three selected Christie texts provides a village setting and a vicarage and situates Marple through the eyes of a male character. The first novel to feature Jane Marple, *The Murder at the Vicarage*, is told by middle-aged male Leonard Clement, the vicar of the Church of England's parish in Marple's hometown of St. Mary Mead. Through the vicar's narration, Marple is established for Christie's readers, who learn of other characters' negative and sometimes misogynistic perceptions of the gray-haired woman. In *The Moving Finger*, Jerry Burton rents a house in the small community of Lymstock where he might recuperate

from injuries, and there meets Marple, also a visitor to the village. Serving as first-person storyteller, Burton is skeptical of the description of Marple as the “expert” called in by a village resident (Christie, *Moving* 164). While *A Murder is Announced* features limited third-person narration, Marple is depicted before her actual appearance in chapter eight, when a former Scotland Yard commissioner describes her as “just the finest detective God ever made” (Christie, *Announced* 41). Like the vicar in *The Murder at the Vicarage*, a respectable, older male character portrays the merits of Marple to doubting listeners in this text. Marple’s ethos is established through male characters as Christie maintains dominant social perspectives. However, while accommodating conventional attitudes, the author adds characteristics of the tension of feminist rhetoric, as described by Ritchie and Ronald.

Christie juxtaposes her depiction of Marple as an elderly woman whose societal value is diminished by age, marital status, and lack of reproductive capabilities against the amateur detective’s discreet endorsement of feminist ideals of individual value and equality—ideals demonstrated through strategies of invitational rhetoric which empower her and defy more persuasive, patriarchal discourse.

Invitational Rhetoric and Afternoon Tea

When prominent Colonel Protheroe is found dead in the vicar’s study, readers of *The Murder at the Vicarage* soon discover that many residents of St. Mary Mead—including his wife, his daughter, his estranged former wife, a visiting artist, and a man charged with poaching—appear to have motives for the murder. Jane Marple’s proximity to the vicarage, as neighbor to Rev. Clement and his wife Griselda, focuses her attention on the crime. Even before Marple’s initial appearance in the novel, other characters first provide their impressions of the amateur sleuth. The vicar’s young wife hosts what she describes as “tea

and scandal” (Christie, *Vicarage* 5) with several “spinsters” of the village. Before the social gathering, Griselda Clement comments to her husband that Marple is “the worst cat in the village” because the elderly woman “always knows every single thing that happens” (Christie, *Vicarage* 5). However, the vicar defends the elderly parishioner, advising that Marple is usually accurate in her conclusions.

While it occurs prior to Protheroe’s murder, the tea social provides an opportunity to examine Marple’s reliance on both the offering of perspectives and the external conditions necessary for invitational rhetoric. Christie illustrates the gossiping tone of the social gathering as Griselda introduces her husband to the conversational topic when he joins his wife and several elderly parishioners; “‘We were just talking,’ said Griselda in a honeysweet voice, ‘about Dr. Stone and Miss Cram’” (Christie, *Vicarage* 13). They are discussing the employment of a young woman as secretary to an older unmarried man, but Marple, not professing a definite opinion on the situation, merely cites parallel relationships, allowing her listeners to make their own comparisons. “‘Remember poor Mollie Carter,’” Marple intones (Christie, *Vicarage* 14), only hinting at the past event. She does add that “‘married ones are the worst’” (Christie, *Vicarage* 14) but is not stating a judgment on the relationship in the current discussion, only describing correlations in general terms. Miss Wetherby clearly disapproves as she chimes in with “‘No nice girl would do it’” (Christie, *Vicarage* 13). Miss Hartnell, even less tactfully passes her own ruling; “‘disgusting, I call it,’” she rejoins (Christie, *Vicarage* 14). Shortly thereafter, the widowed Mrs. Price Ridley assesses another village resident’s behavior, “‘How like Colonel Protheroe, and how absurd’” (Christie, *Vicarage* 15). Marple, though, responds that she is uncertain “‘about it [Protheroe’s behavior] being absurd’” and continues by providing the facts of a previous village situation

in which a woman fooled citizens and stole money by pretending to accept subscriptions for Welfare. Marple concludes, ““One is so inclined to be trusting and take people at their own valuation”” (Christie, *Vicarage* 15). Marple steers clear of judgment or overt opinion, offering only brief narrative intrusions, allowing her neighbors to draw their own conclusions.

Also during afternoon tea, another example of the absence of persuasion from Marple stems from the insinuation of an affair between visiting artist Lawrence Redding and Protheroe’s daughter, Lettice. Miss Wetherby says, ““It certainly looks like it. What do you think, Miss Marple?”” The narrator describes Marple as appearing “thoughtful” before she responds with, ““I wouldn’t have said so myself. Not Lettice. Quite another person I should have said,”” but provides no additional explanation (Christie, *Vicarage* 18). This conversation allows for direct comparison of rhetorical styles; forceful verdicts professed by her companions contrast with Marple’s own unassuming rhetoric. Her peers pass judgments on village relationships, while Marple merely seems to meditate on the topics at hand, neither casting aspersions nor stating opinions, permitting her listeners opportunities to form comparisons and draw their own conclusions. Marple’s rhetorical strategies during afternoon tea parallel Foss and Griffin’s explanation of “rhetors [who] do not seek to impose their positions on audience members” (7). Unlike her other elderly female companions, Marple merely exhibits her “vision of the world,” revealing how events and relationships appear to her (Foss and Griffin 7).

Further, in employing stories that parallel the situations under discussion, Marple utilizes narrative in much the same way that Foss and Griffin indicate in their description of invitational rhetoric. Presenting stories to share perspectives rather than as a means to

convince listeners to adhere to a specific interpretation, Marple offers the Welfare woman story to illustrate possible explanations for current village events and relationships under discussion at tea. Thereby, Christie's elderly detective illustrates Foss and Griffin's portrayal of invitational rhetoric's "giving of expression to a perspective without advocating its support or seeking its acceptance" (7).

The conversation at afternoon tea also reveals the blurred boundaries between rhetor and audience evinced in Foss and Griffin's definition of invitational rhetoric. As they explain, "audience members ... may engage in offering behavior" much like a classroom or colloquium discussion (Foss and Griffin 8). At various points, Misses Marple, Wetherby, Hartnell, and the widowed Mrs. Price Ridley speak, taking turns in the discussion. Even the Clements, Leonard and Griselda, are free to advance comments. The conversation is truly an exchange as no character serves as solitary speaker in this example from Christie's text, each contributing to the dialogue in a more dialectical—not one-sided—model of discourse, although some urge their own presentations of opinion. Overall, Marple's participation in the exchange during Griselda Clement's social gathering relies on many elements of invitational rhetoric; someone else speaks, Marple speaks, someone else passes judgment, Marple shares a general impression. The shared "rhetorship" and Marple's lack of persuasiveness are elements of invitational rhetoric, evinced in the comfortable and safe interchange.

The conversation during afternoon tea also illustrates many aspects of invitational rhetoric's external conditions as outlined by Foss and Griffin. Foss and Griffin explain, "rhetoric contributes to a feeling of safety when it conveys to audience members that the ideas and feelings they share with the rhetor will be received with respect and care" (10). Further, the use of invitational rhetoric allows that communications will neither threaten

order nor devalue participants. With their discussion, the elderly guests, their hostess, and her husband imply no sense of risk or fear with their words. All participants are easily capable of supplying details for discussion, each serving as rhetor at some point within the conversation. Thus, the brief circumstances which introduce Marple also provide evidence of invitational rhetoric in that the rhetors share equally and freely contributes to the conversation as they see fit, reminders of invitational rhetoric's embodiment of feminist principles. Throughout *The Murder at the Vicarage*, Jane Marple continually illustrates aspects of Foss and Griffin's definition of invitational rhetoric.

Invitational Rhetoric and a Second Vicarage

Male narrator Jerry Burton first meets Jane Marple in a vicarage in *The Moving Finger*. Marple is the guest of an old friend, the vicar's wife, Maude Dane Calthrops, who has urged her chum to visit following the disclosure of the finger-pointing letters and two deaths, the apparent suicide of Mrs. Symmington and the "murder by person or persons unknown" of the Symmington's maid, Agnes Woddell (Christie, *Moving* 165). Burton and his sister Joanna visit the vicarage to join the older women for tea, and Marple begins with her own unobtrusive nonverbal rhetorical offerings. As Burton attests, she seems "an amiable elderly lady who was knitting something with white fleecy wool" (Christie, *Moving* 167), with Christie again highlighting the non-threatening image presented by Marple. The elderly knitter's appearance supports Foss and Griffin's explanation of "the symbolic choices rhetors make that reveal their perspectives" (9). Marple's demeanor is supported by her use of narrative comparisons to people and events more familiar to her. She suggests that the late Agnes bears similarity to her own Edith, "such a nice little maid, and so willing, but sometimes just a little slow to take in things" (Christie, *Moving* 167). Marple moves on to

describe “a cousin whose niece’s sister-in-law had had a great deal of annoyance and trouble over some anonymous letters” (Christie, *Moving* 167). The amateur detective’s anecdotes relate her own understandings of the recent events in Lymstock without persuading her listeners to a particular point of view. She poses her own brief stories, not to coerce agreement from the Burtons or her old friend and the vicar but instead as a means of “simply offering the perspective the story represents” (Foss and Griffin 7). Marple allows her listeners to either accept or deny potential parallels from her own narratives.

Further verbal behavior on Marple’s part utilizes additional elements of invitational rhetoric. Marple opens the rhetorical floor, so to speak, to hear the opinions of the village residents, asking Mrs. Dane Calthrops about the townspeople’s perspectives with, ““What do *they* think?”” [emphasis in original] (Christie, *Moving* 167). Foss and Griffin explain that when speakers “enter the interaction with a goal not of converting others to their positions but of sharing what they know, extending one another’s ideas, thinking critically about all the ideas offered, and coming to an understanding of the subject and of one another, they are engaged in offering” (Foss and Griffin 8). Therefore, Marple invites her friends to reveal their own perspectives on the attitudes of others, initially keeping a safe distance from their own beliefs. She maintains an open and free space for discussion, following up others’ responses with her own questions to continue the conversation and her own subtle investigation. When Joanna and Mrs. Dane Calthrops describe the mysterious Mrs. Cleat, whom Joanna terms “the village witch,” Marple supposes how the girls of the village likely seek advice from the strange older woman. It is only when Burton himself asks a question that Marple presents her own perspective. He quickly inquires, ““But why shouldn’t people suspect her of the murder now?”” (Christie, *Moving* 168). Then Marple explains that since

Woddell was killed with a skewer, Mrs. Cleat is no longer to be suspected, as ““she could ill-wish her so that the girl would waste away and die from natural causes”” (Christie, *Moving* 168). Rather than claim that Mrs. Cleat did not kill the young maid, Marple proposes a clarification that explains how the “witch” woman might have committed the crime if she had in fact been the murderer, recognizing in Woddell beliefs similar to those of other young women. Marple relies on her own experience of human nature as well as invitational rhetoric’s “re-sourcement.” Through her inoffensive conversation, Marple personifies what Foss and Griffin term “offering [which] involves not probing or invading but giving ...” (7), relying on the external conditions of invitational rhetoric of safety, value, and freedom.

As the social scene continues, Marple encourages Burton to realize the value of his own viewpoints in the investigation, supporting the idea that he might be freer of prejudiced opinions as a newcomer to the village. She modestly tells him, ““Now *you*—excuse me if I am being too personal—are a stranger here, and have a knowledge of the world and of various aspects of life. It seems to me that you ought to be able to find a solution to this distasteful problem”” [emphasis in original] (Christie, *Moving* 168). Burton smilingly indulges the elderly woman by sharing the narrative of a recent dream. He mentions a telephone message, and Marple asks its relevance. He suggests that the message had not been in the dream at all but was instead a note that his sister had left him in case someone telephoned for her. Marple, enlivened by his comments, leans forward with flushed cheeks, and asks more pointedly but very politely, ““what the message was?”” (Christie, *Moving* 170). Through this discussion, Marple continues to rely on aspects of invitational rhetoric, calling upon what Foss and Griffin describe as “an invitation to understanding” (5). Guiding the conversation, Marple’s questions and responses allow that no single character serves as

rhetor, instead allowing for an exchange of commentary from all parties present even the vicar contributes with occasional Latin quotations. Having invited their confidence, Marple soon shares her own perspectives and invites the others to see the world through her perspective.

Marple suspects that the telephone message might have been ““something quite ordinary”” (Christie, *Moving* 170) and continues with some observations of her own. While she never overtly asserts an opinion, Marple offers general comments that allow her listeners to recognize her perspective. Returning to her knitting needles, the elderly sleuth once more seems thoughtful as if merely musing aloud about the criminal situation. She suggests, ““to commit a successful murder must be very much like bringing off a conjuring trick”” and goes on to elucidate how a murderer must ““make people look at the wrong thing in the wrong place”” (Christie, *Moving* 170), again offering general statements that circumvent specific suspicions but allow her listeners to draw their own conclusions. Marple provides plenty of space for others to form independent opinions under invitational rhetoric’s external conditions of security, worth, and self-determination, as ““absent are efforts to dominate another because the goal is the understanding and appreciation of another’s perspective rather than the denigration of it simply because it is different from the rhetor’s own”” (Foss and Griffin 6). Burton also reports that police Superintendent Nash believes the Symmingtons’ nanny when she claims she has not received a threatening anonymous letter. Marple concludes her introductory scene in the novel with, ““Now that’s *very* interesting. That’s the most interesting thing I’ve heard yet”” [emphasis in original] (Christie, *Moving* 172), displaying her continued reliance on rhetorical tools that invite the sharing of perspectives without persuasion.

Invitational Rhetoric, the Royal Spa Hotel, and a Third Vicarage

A third text suggests a similar rhetorical repertoire for the amateur sleuth. Originally published in 1950, *A Murder is Announced* centers on an advertisement placed in the gazette of the small village of Chipping Cleghorn. The ad reads, “A murder is announced and will take place on Friday, October 29th, at Little Paddocks at 6:30 p.m. Friends please accept this, the only intimation” (Christie, *Announced* 5). Little Paddocks is the residence of Letitia Blacklock who allows an old school chum and two young cousins to share her country home. On the appointed evening, several curious friends and neighbors appear at Little Paddocks to see what the advertisement might imply. When an apparent stranger enters, the lights go out, and shots are fired, it appears that Blacklock was the intended victim, but the intruder lies dead, seemingly having shot himself with the revolver at his side. Soon the police, in the form of Detective-Inspector Dermot Craddock, investigate. However, it is no less than a former Scotland Yard commissioner who introduces Marple. Sir Henry Clithering encourages his godson Craddock to “remember that an elderly unmarried woman who knits and gardens is streets ahead of any detective sergeant” (Christie, *Announced* 42). Craddock and his superior Rydesdale are skeptical. While Rydesdale replies cynically to Clithering’s praise of Marple with “I’ll be glad to see your paragon,” upon meeting Marple, Craddock thinks disgustedly, that the old woman is “completely ga-ga” (Christie, *Announced* 92-93). Christie pairs conflicting descriptions of Marple through the eyes of male characters, the incredulity of some revealing their own masculine ignorance of her feminine capabilities.

Marple does not enter *A Murder is Announced* until chapter eight and then happens to be conveniently nearby at the Royal Spa Hotel in Mendenham Wells, where the dead intruder at Little Paddocks, Rudi Scherz, had been employed. The elderly sleuth is visiting the facility

for her health but stays, as the reader learns later, with an old friend's daughter, who happens to be the wife of the vicar at Chipping Cleghorn. Marple is once again in a vicarage and draws the investigators' attention by writing a letter that modestly suggests she "might possibly be of some slight assistance" (Christie, *Announced* 91), indicating too that she hopes not to waste the detectives' time. Marple is simultaneously self-deprecating and helpful in addressing the authorities. Not overtly implicating her potential utility, Marple's modest rhetoric *presents* the possibility that she might be truly useful, and thus the elderly sleuth invites the authorities to decide for themselves. Marple enacts an aspect of invitational rhetoric suggesting that the rhetor does not impress her position on her audience, as explained by Foss and Griffin (7).

This instance of Marple's written communication is supported by other examples of nonverbal rhetoric in her first scenes within *A Murder is Announced*. As Foss and Griffin suggest, nonverbal communication, an element of invitational rhetoric, might include clothing and other unspoken elements of representation (9). Upon first meeting Jane Marple, police detective Craddock decides that she appears almost exactly as he had anticipated. The text reads:

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 heavily enmeshed in fleecy wool. Wool round her shoulders in the form of a lacy cape and wool that she was knitting and which turned out to be a baby's shawl. (Christie, *Announced* 92)

Marple's physical impression is, like her written language, quietly unassuming and unpretentious. Marple is "all incoherent delight and pleasure at seeing Sir Henry and became

quite flustered when introduced to Chief Constable and Detective-Inspector Craddock” (Christie, *Announced* 92). She later must “disentangle” herself from her wool and knitting needles, “flustered and protesting” (Christie, *Announced* 93), as she joins the professional investigators in the hotel manager’s sitting room. Her demeanor supports her grandmotherly image as Marple seems out of context, perhaps even insecure in her actions. However, once in the private room and invited by Rydesdale to comment, “Miss Marple came to the point with unexpected brevity” (Christie, *Announced*, 93). Marple’s tone changes as she and the police officers get down to business. The amateur detective says, ““It was a cheque ... He altered it”” (Christie, *Announced* 93). Spectators—and police detectives—perceive her as the stereotypical aging “spinster,” yet her mental acuity and observations defy her appearance. Such nonverbal rhetoric *presents* perspectives rather than persuades to a specific attitude. Foss and Griffin posit, as an aspect of invitational rhetoric, “self-determination involves the recognition that audience members are the authorities on their own lives and accords respect to others’ capacity and right to constitute their worlds as they choose” (4). Thus, Marple’s appearance and behavior may seem contradictory but actually provide others the opportunity to form their own perspectives. Both Christie and Marple communicate without an impetus to alter the perspectives or expectations of others, a distinct device of invitational rhetoric.

Once Sir Henry Clithering entreats Marple’s comments on Rudi Scherz’s forging of her check amount, he also asks, ““And perhaps he reminded you of someone?”” (Christie, *Announced* 94). Clithering, familiar with Marple from previous cases, seems aware of the amateur sleuth’s methods of analyzing criminal behavior by paralleling events from life. Smiling, Marple responds to Clithering, by describing a young man who worked at the fish shop in her home village of St. Mary Mead. She likens Fred Tyler to Scherz, suggesting that

both men had “a shifty eye ... the kind that looks very straight at you and never looks away or blinks” (Christie, *Announced* 95). Her illustration through narrative is intended to elucidate her perspective, rather than to convince her listeners to her point of view, a tenet of Foss and Griffin’s proposal on invitational rhetoric. However, this example of Marple’s observational talents lends credibility to Christie’s readers’ perceptions of the elderly detective’s crime-solving skills.

Also during these scenes that usher Marple into the plot of *A Murder is Announced*, the amateur detective presents her observations to the professionals. In discussing Craddock’s questioning of the waitress who had been dating Scherz, Marple offers, “I think there’s more to come” without insisting her perspective should be adopted (Christie, *Announced* 95). In a self-deprecating manner, Marple offers her own take on the dead man’s behavior. She comments that she does not explain well, yet wonders aloud how “a personable young man” who has been successfully stealing small sums here and there would run the risk of holding up a houseful of people at gunpoint. She contends, “It doesn’t make sense!” [emphasis in original] (Christie, *Announced* 96). When Craddock “aggressively” questions Marple about what did occur, the aged woman replies, “But how should I know what happened?” (Christie, *Announced* 96). Rather than answers to persuade the police to her point of view, Marple presents questions, highlighting incongruous elements of the case. When Craddock becomes annoyed and lists the known details of the case, Marple emphasizes a significant point of his statement. Christie writes, “‘But surely,’ said Miss Marple gently. ‘They couldn’t—actually—have seen anything at all....’” (Christie, *Announced* 98). Marple’s words mildly point out what Craddock has said but fails to grasp. Rather than overtly dominate the conversation with her opinions, Marple, like a teacher,

allows her listener to come to his own realizations about the facts at hand. As Foss and Griffin clarify, “there may be a wrenching loose of ideas as assumptions . . .” through the use of invitational rhetoric, even when the intent is not to change or dominate (6). Marple’s presentation of perspective allows Craddock an opportunity to review his own assumptions and let loose of the idea that the witnesses could have seen the masked intruder when he flourished a flashlight into their faces in the dark house. Later, she asserts, “‘Nobody could possibly have seen a revolver even if he had one’” (Christie, *Announced* 99), but only after Craddock has come to his own conclusion. Marple’s patience indicates an interaction based on respect for the police officer’s ability to connect the dots for himself, her rhetoric “offering additional ways of thinking about the subject for everyone involved in the interaction” (Foss and Griffin 8), attesting to a sense of value and self-determination on the part of both parties.

This episode introduces Marple to readers of *A Murder is Announced* much as earlier conversations present the elderly sleuth to readers of *The Moving Finger* and *The Murder at the Vicarage*. While the three scenes are different—social gatherings at vicarages versus a police inquiry at an expensive hotel—Marple is able to invoke elements of invitational rhetoric in disparate settings with fellow rhetors and listeners from varying walks of life. This aptitude implies a sense of equality with others and a recognition of value and freedom, all aspects of the external conditions of invitational rhetoric.

Invitational Rhetoric and Investigation

Marple employs the tools of invitational rhetoric not only during her initial scenes in the three selected novels but also throughout each murder investigation. In later conversations with Vicar Clement and his wife in *The Murder at the Vicarage*, Marple again

offers her own perspectives of the world and exhibits the external conditions of invitational rhetoric. As the three characters discuss potential suspects in the murder case, Marple provides her own sense of the situation, noting that ““everyone thinks it is somebody different”” (Christie, *Vicarage* 53), offering her perceptions about the case without attempting to persuade her listeners to her point of view. She asks, ““Such a to-do, isn’t it?”” (Christie, *Vicarage* 53), and goes on to note that the vicar’s young nephew who is himself playing detective must believe he knows who the murderer is. ““Well, I suppose we all think we know,”” she concludes (Christie, *Vicarage* 53). Christie and Marple leave the audience ““freedom, the power to choose or decide”” (Foss and Griffin 12), for themselves. While Marple implies that she has her own theories on the case, she refrains from sharing them, preventing her beliefs from influencing others, possibly reflecting a lack of evidence.

Similar invitational aspects are illustrated as Marple later indicates that there are seven potential suspects for the crime but refuses to name them. ““Mind you I name no names,”” the sleuth defends, ““That wouldn’t be right. But I’m afraid there’s a lot of wickedness in the world”” (Christie, *Vicarage* 79). Rather than dominate her audience or impugn the value of others—the innocent suspects—Marple keeps mum on the subject, until, of course, she can address the case with greater certainty. She also continues to share narratives. ““So many parallels come to the mind,”” Marple explains, as she tells the story of a seemingly respectable former churchwarden who led a double life with a second family, ““a terrible shock to his wife and daughter”” (Christie, *Vicarage* 93). Speaking to others as an equal, valuing identities and information, and owning her own sense of determination are indications that Marple does not feel herself restricted by virtue of her gender or her age.

As the murder investigation continues, Marple also demonstrates a willingness to accept new information and reformulate her own perspectives. When she learns that Redding has been arrested for Protheroe's murder, Marple is surprised, commenting to the vicar and his wife that "Now I should not have thought—" until interrupted by Griselda Clement (Christie, *Vicarage* 54). Upon hearing of Redding's confession, she is disconcerted but goes on to admit the errors in her own considerations of the crime; "You say he has confessed? Oh! dear, I see I have been sadly at sea—yes, sadly at sea" (Christie, *Vicarage* 54). The description of Marple's reaction permits the reader to recognize the elderly sleuth's appraisal of information and recognition of her own incorrect thinking. Later, she tells the vicar, "Yes, this case makes one think of so many things—too many. It's very hard to arrive at the truth" (Christie, *Vicarage* 94). In a subsequent conversation with the vicar and the released suspect Redding, Marple indicates that she feels it is best to suspect everyone "just a little" and notes, "What I say is, you never really know, do you?" (Christie, *Vicarage* 148). The amateur sleuth's statements reveal her willingness to admit additional details and perspectives, appropriate within scrutiny of a criminal case when gathering evidence. Clement as narrator adds, "This was typical of Miss Marple" (Christie, *Vicarage* 148), indicating that his elderly neighbor openly receives new material and evidence. Foss and Griffin posit that "a critical dimension of offering a perspective ... is a willingness to yield" (7), and, at this point, Marple displays an inclination to alter her own vision of the world, relinquishing previous attitudes.

Throughout the murder investigation, there is no hint that Marple advocates what others *ought* to do or think; instead she asks questions or restates facts. In discussing elements of the case with Clement, Marple even begins with a question that restates an

established fact as she expresses conditions at the vicarage prior to Protheroe's murder. "At twenty minutes past six?" she queries [emphasis in original] (Christie, *Vicarage* 95). She continues with more details already known to the vicar; "Your maid, Mary, had already told him that you wouldn't be in till half past six at the earliest, and he appeared to be quite willing to wait until then. And yet at twenty past six he sits down and says 'he can't wait any longer'" (Christie, *Vicarage* 95). As a teacher might to induce critical thinking among her students, the elderly woman has not supplied any additional information, but because of her emphasis, the vicar reviews the details and observes issues he has failed previously to recognize. Clement shares his own view of Marple's mental acuity; "her keen wits had seen what we failed to perceive" (Christie, *Vicarage* 95). Her discourse style is commended through the male narrator's positive response, affirming the amateur detective's intellectual abilities.

Christie's aged detective further exemplifies the external conditions of uninterrupted listening. On several occasions, Marple remains quietly responsive and courteous while others relate their stories. Following Protheroe's murder, Clement details for his neighbor a recent encounter with a suspect; the vicar narrates, "I described my homecoming while she [Marple] listened attentively" (Christie, *Vicarage* 55). Marple does not comment until her neighbor has completed his tale. Later in the novel, Clement describes Marple while one of the suspects speaks. He again explains, "Miss Marple listened attentively" (Christie, *Vicarage* 147). As Foss and Griffin further detail, "listeners do not interrupt, comfort, or insert anything of their own as others tell of their experiences" (11). Rather than assert her opinions or query another speaker through interjections, Marple allows others to share, enabling her to glean details for further investigation through rhetorical listening.

While appearing in only a few scenes of *The Moving Finger*'s investigation into the death of Mrs. Symmington and the subsequent murder of her maid, in the midst of poison pen letters flying all over the village, Marple continues to rely on invitational strategies of discourse. When Aimée Griffith, the doctor's sister, is arrested for her poison pen letter to the Symmingtons' nursery governess, the elderly detective is obviously upset. Burton describes Marple as "very much distressed" as she tells him, "'It isn't *true*, Mr. Burton. I'm sure it isn't true'" [emphasis in original] (Christie, *Moving* 204). Marple's reaction depicts one of the few times the older woman is troubled as she "was murmuring helplessly: 'Oh dear, oh dear, what can one *do*?'" [emphasis in original] (Christie, *Moving* 204). Marple rambles on in clearly searching tones, responding to herself with her usual self-deprecation: "'But I am so old and so ignorant, and I am afraid, so foolish'" (Christie, *Moving* 204). While Marple makes plain her concern, she never clarifies her stance. She asserts that the police are wrong in their assumptions but does not attempt persuasion by explaining to Burton, the male narrator, why she feels so strongly about the error. While Marple avoids overtly impacting the thinking of others, Christie is also distancing readers from the sleuth's knowledge. Such rhetorical techniques permit audiences to make their deductions about the murderer, also allowing Burton to come to his own conclusions while readers are allowed time to consider their particular suspicions. Although Marple chooses to keep Burton in the dark as she works with Megan Symmington to smoke out the murderer, Christie leaves room for the text's larger audience to think through the case, not influenced by Marple's understanding, inviting them to arrive at their own perceptions. Christie's writing serves as an example of the functions of invitational rhetoric, valuing her readers' abilities to contemplate the clues and potentially solve the case for themselves.

Soon, Burton notices Marple leaving the police station. Again, neither narrator nor readers can ascertain exactly what Marple is up to. Instead, Christie keeps the focus on Burton's own mental wranglings and activities, as he spies on the Symmington household, soon realizing that police officers are also present. However, by chapter fourteen, Marple is again front and center, with Mrs. Dane Calthrops asserting how correct she was in calling in an expert as the murderer has been apprehended. Burton, unaware that Marple has already solved a number of crimes in earlier stories, does not understand. "That's my expert," the vicar's wife explains, "Jane Marple ... the woman knows more about the different kinds of human wickedness than anyone I've ever known" (Christie, *Moving* 215). Marple reappears with her usual unassuming modesty, suggesting that her friend should not, "put it quite like that, dear" but admits that "One sees a good deal of human nature living in a village all the year ..." (Christie, *Moving* 215). Despite her overt demurring, Marple soon regales her listeners with an account of the case's solution, putting much of the responsibility on the narrator. "The truth was really so very obvious. *You* saw it, you know, Mr. Burton," she tells him [emphasis in original] (Christie, *Moving* 216). Marple then serves as main rhetor for several pages as she sums up the crimes and their resolution, only occasionally questioned by Joanna and Jerry Burton. Marple's rhetoric shares responsibility with others for the positive outcome as she presents her understanding of the case and allows for inquiries from her audience. While the elderly sleuth's intent may not be to change her audience, Marple's reliance on invitational rhetoric "contribute[s] to the understanding by all participants of the issue and of one another" (Foss and Griffin 6). Rather than gaining control or power over her audience members by altering their beliefs or opinions, Marple offers modification only "as a

result of new understanding and insights gained in the exchange of ideas” as Foss and Griffin relate in their proposal for invitational rhetoric (6).

Throughout the investigation into the crimes in *A Murder is Announced*, Jane Marple repeatedly relies on nonverbal rhetoric as well as presentation of her observations through non-persuasive means. When Craddock visits Marple in the garden of the vicarage, he is calmed not only by the sun’s warmth but by “the steady click of Miss Marple’s knitting needles” while “her placid blue eyes regarded him thoughtfully” (Christie, *Announced* 125). Through her demeanor, an offering of nonverbal but soothing rhetoric, Marple serves as a peaceful companion, with whom Craddock soon feels sufficiently comfortable to speak his mind, and he urges her to remove herself from potential danger. Despite Marple’s confident yet unassuming rhetoric, Craddock expresses concern for her safety and encourages her not to be nosy. Later, Marple’s rhetoric proves her sympathetic and again encourages others to share confidences with her. When Leticia Blacklock sobs overwhelmingly and laments the loss of her recently murdered friend, Marple speaks sensitively to her. ““I know what you mean,”” Marple assures, ““One is alone when the last one who remembers is gone,”” and the two sit quietly without speaking (Christie, *Announced* 197). The amateur detective relies on an openness toward her audience, as described by Foss and Griffin in their definition of invitational rhetoric. Marple’s nonverbal and verbal communications open a stage for others to disclose their perspectives and does not “engage in strategies that may damage or sever the connection between them [rhetors] and their audiences” (Foss and Griffin 6). No matter her suspicions, Marple is ever the avid listener, welcoming the communications of others as they impart their own concerns.

As the police continue the investigation into the shooting of the intruder at Little Paddocks and the subsequent murder of Blacklock's friend Dora Bunner, Marple presents facts without persuasion, often relying on brief narratives, and asks questions that invite the contributions of others. As Foss and Griffin note, narrative is not inherently persuasive but can be provided instead merely to illustrate the speaker's impression of the world. During her conversation with Craddock in the vicarage garden, the amateur sleuth notes the difficulties of the inspector's inquiry. She notes that really knowing one's neighbors is not as simple as it once was. Marple remarks, "Because that's what's worrying you, isn't it? And that's really the particular way the world has changed since the war" (Christie, *Announced* 126). She goes on to liken Chipping Cleghorn to her own community of St. Mary Mead, where once everyone knew each other because their parents and grandparents had lived there too. Her general commentary allows Craddock to realize that this lack of knowledge is what is bothering him as he investigates the cases. Marple describes the circumstances, but the detective inspector determines for himself the obstacles he faces, corresponding to Foss and Griffin's clarification of an external condition of invitational rhetoric which is "grounded in a respect for others" (4). Marple respects the police inspector's ability to think for himself without persuasive direction on her part.

Despite Craddock's warnings, Marple continues snooping and is soon visiting the crime scene and softly interrogating witnesses. As Christie writes, "the old lady was very charming in her gentle gossipy fashion" (*Announced* 130), when she and the vicar's wife visit Little Paddocks and speak with the inhabitants. Marple's technique—as an elderly single woman—is to share her own fears of burglars and intruders, thus inviting

conversational contributions from others, while she in turn provides polite, interested responses. Christie writes:

‘Did it all happen in this room then?’ asked Miss Marple, adding apologetically: ‘I’m afraid you must think me sadly *curious*, Miss Blacklock—but it really is so very exciting—just like something one reads about in the paper—I’m just longing to hear all about it and to picture it all, if you know what I mean— [emphasis in original] (Christie, *Announced* 132)

Miss Marple is then examining bullet holes in the home’s walls. She responds with a gasp, “‘What a marvelous—what a providential escape’” (Christie, *Announced* 133). Marple’s curiosity appears genuine, and she depends on her own inquisitive nature to investigate crime. She also enacts invitational rhetoric as she courteously queries others, commenting on lovely tables and pretty lamps, before turning the conversation to the subject of photographs, photographs which might offer clues to the case. Marple enlists the tools of invitational rhetoric, offering her perspectives and inviting the contributions of others in a safe and friendly environment. As Foss and Griffin indicate, “efforts to dominate and gain power over others cannot be used to develop relationships of equality” (4), so instead Marple initiates comfortable conversations that rely on camaraderie. While some conversations may emphasize her goals of accessing additional information, the gentle demeanor and genuine compassion of the aged detective also explain her natural interest in the lives of others, herself a resident of a small rural community. Her gentle demeanor and genuinely compassionate behavior Again and again, the behavior of Christie’s female sleuth typifies components of non-persuasive, non-threatening rhetoric, refuting patriarchal hierarchy, and reinforcing feminist ideologies

Invitational Rhetoric and Male Authority

While Marple does not interject or induce others to her way of thinking, the male police officers in Christie's *The Murder at the Vicarage* interrupt, overtly disagree, and devalue the elderly "spinster." In sharing what she knows about the investigation with Inspector Slack, Marple selects her words carefully, implying modesty and uncertainty, while also seeking additional information. Her rhetoric indicates a sense of equity and safety in conversation with most characters such as the vicar, his wife, and her other neighbors, but she withdraws to more self-deprecating tones when challenging police authorities. Marple suggests that she might be "*quite* wrong" and that she is "so stupid about these things," acknowledging her own lack of expertise in the valuation of stolen silver objects [emphasis in original] (Christie, *Vicarage* 213). However, because of her use of humble rhetoric, Marple gains details concerning the robbery and of Protheroe's murder. Rather than the direct and shrill arguments of Mrs. Price Ridley who complains vociferously to police about prank phone calls, Marple is civil and polite, never prompting authorities to dismiss her or her commentary. When the vicar does not quite comprehend her initial explanation about the thief's need to exchange the stolen silver with fakes, Marple becomes "flustered and apologetic" (Christie, *Vicarage* 214) but changes her tactics, not unlike Foss and Griffin's explanation of "resourcement" (9). Marple says, "It seems to me that—that the things couldn't just have been abstracted, so to speak. The only satisfactory thing to do would be to replace these things with copies. Then, perhaps the robbery wouldn't be discovered for some time" (Christie, *Vicarage* 214). Marple reframes her words to elicit Clement's understanding, thereby relying on an additional tool of invitational rhetoric, outlining her meaning through a different context.

In meeting with legal authorities, Marple offers her perspectives on the crime. When Marple feels that she has something to share, the behavior of Christie's amateur detective typifies components of invitational rhetoric and is portrayed in opposition to the behavior of male authorities. When Marple begins an explanation of her analysis of the murder, Chief Constable Colonel Melchett interrupts. Christie writes, "Colonel Melchett had been snorting impatiently for some time. Now he broke out," interrupting the elderly woman with "“Absolute nonsense – the whole thing!”" (*Vicarage* 267). The rude communication of the dominant male authority figure overtly contrasts with Marple's implementation of much more civil invitational rhetoric. Christie's portrayal of the polite and non-threatening Marple continues to fly in the face of the aggressive and negative attitudes of patriarchal representatives.

A subsequent meeting, though, emphasizes Marple's use of nonverbal offering as a tool of invitational rhetoric. While the older woman explains to Melchett and the vicar who actually shot Protheroe, Clement describes Marple's physical demeanor. As the two men gaze at her, surprised by her revelations, she "“arranged her lace fichu, pushed back the fleecy shawl that draped her shoulders, and began to deliver a gentle old-maidish lecture comprising the most astounding statements in the most natural way in the world”" (Christie, *Vicarage* 267). Her calm and unpretentious manner—a nonverbal offering of her sense of the world—permits Marple to communicate more effectively with the law officer who has just snorted and demeaned her. In the face of the power and persuasion of patriarchal hierarchy, Christie allows her unassuming sleuth to outwit male dominance through her use of components of invitational rhetoric.

Negative conventional attitudes are further reinforced in *The Moving Finger*, published a decade later. Narrator Jerry Burton, upon meeting the attractive nanny to the young Symmington sons, relates, “How strange that a girl could trouble your innermost soul so long as she kept her mouth shut, and that the moment she spoke the glamour could vanish as though it had never been” (Christie, *Moving* 28). Later, in conversation with his sister, Burton maintains a judgmental tone with his statement that ““All you women are alike”” (Christie, *Moving* 43). Christie’s use of a male perspective allows her texts to appear very conventional and sexist, supporting the conservative nature of British mystery fiction at the time. Retired military man, Colonel Appleton, a Lymstock village resident, shares his own narrow attitude when he tells Burton, “Funny business this anonymous letter stunt—these desiccated old maids are always the ones who go for it—though the Griffith woman wasn’t bad looking even if she was a bit long in the tooth” (Christie, *Moving* 205). Burton warning the young Megan Symmington against Marple, describes the elderly woman as “that old Tabby” (Christie, *Moving* 207). Reflecting its era, the text reveals discriminatory male characters who judge a woman’s worth based on her appearance and who categorize older woman as catty. However, Jane Marple proves them wrong, precisely because her abilities are underestimated, pinpointing the male sender of the poison pen letters who is also the murderer, through her understated rhetoric, which never directly opposes the male-normative attitudes but serves as a subtle counterpoint to their negative stereotypes. As Marple explains following the resolution, ““You see, no one was suspecting a *man*”” [emphasis in original] (Christie, *Moving* 221). The senior citizen personifies what the male rhetoric denies, a productive, intelligent older woman in their midst—cleverer than they themselves are.

Marple's place as an established, respected character is reflected in *A Murder is Announced*, published nearly a decade after *The Moving Finger*. While older women are again branded as catlike, “the old Pussies,” as Clithering gleefully notes, are more positively classified because the former Scotland Yard commissioner explains, “They hear everything. They see everything. And, unlike the famous adage, they speak all evil” (Christie, *Announced* 91). While “spinsters” remain cordoned off from vibrant and productive life, they are actually useful in Clithering's perspective, a standpoint eventually shared by his godson Craddock. Well before Marple wraps up the murder case, Craddock slowly acquiesces to her value in the investigation. He thinks that “she might have put her finger on something—old people were often very sharp” (Christie, *Announced* 97). Later, Craddock even invites the amateur sleuth to read correspondence discovered in his investigations at Little Paddocks. “I don't know if it's a breach of confidence,” he tells Marple, “but I'd like you to look at this letter” (Christie, *Announced* 210). The amateur sleuth has earned a place in the esteem of the professional detective as he asks that she share her perspective on his evidence. Craddock gleans additional information through his conversation with Marple and the vicar's wife and expresses his gratitude, saying “I'm glad I came here to you ladies,” (Christie, *Announced* 216). Male attitudes depicted in the novels are generally restrictive, revealing gradual acceptance of an elderly woman's worth in the resolution of crime, and when Marple subsequently solves the murders, Christie imparts the advantages of rhetorical strategies enlisted by an aging single woman.

Defending Invitational Rhetoric

Building on Foss and Griffin's scholarship, Jennifer Emerling Bone, Cindy L. Griffin, and T.M. Linda Scholz confront criticisms of invitational rhetoric in “Beyond Traditional

Conceptualizations of Rhetoric: Invitational Rhetoric and a Move Toward Civility.” The purpose of their essay “is to expand our knowledge of invitational rhetoric practices, as they exist in an increasingly diverse, complex, and interconnected world and to illustrate the ways that invitational rhetoric works to promote and establish civility in a variety of venues” (Bone et al. 435). Examples of Marple’s use—and sometimes abandonment—of invitational rhetoric supports their defense of Foss and Griffin’s proposal.

Challenging the complaint by scholars such as Dana Cloud and Nina Lozano-Reich that invitational rhetoric is not suitable for all circumstances, the authors maintain that Foss and Griffin never intended this rhetorical style be deemed suitable for every situation, citing the original scholarship that claims invitational rhetoric as “a viable form of interaction in many instances” (qtd. in Bone et al. 439). These scholars indicate that invitational rhetoric is not always useful or valuable, and Christie’s Marple also makes that plain. The narrator of *The Murder at the Vicarage* describes a conversation with his wife, Marple, and the murdered man’s daughter, Lettice Protheroe, noting that his wife “opened her mouth to say something, but for some unexplained reason shut it again” (Christie, *Vicarage* 57). Several lines later, after Lettice’s departure, Griselda turns to Marple and asks, ““Why did you step on my foot?”” (Christie, *Vicarage* 58), to which Marple smiles and responds that she was concerned about what Griselda might have revealed. Marple who frequently avails herself of the subtle and civil strategies of invitational rhetoric is not beyond a bit of social violence when she deems it necessary. In *The Moving Finger*, when Jerry Burton tries to follow Megan Symmington after her secretive conversation with Marple, the elderly woman blocks his way, telling him that following the young woman ““wouldn’t be wise”” (Christie, *Moving* 205). Marple tells the novel’s narrator not to contact Megan. His response is that “there was

something about the old lady's assertion that chilled me" (Christie, *Moving* 205). Marple adjusts her rhetoric as the situation requires. In *A Murder is Announced*, following the resolution of the investigation, Marple is quite firm in sharing her opinion of Charlotte and Leticia Blacklock's father. She says, "But Dr. Blacklock, I think, was an old-fashioned, narrow-minded, tyrannical, and obstinate man" (Christie, *Announced* 269). As her statement attests, Marple's rhetoric does sometimes offer judgment. Thus, Marple's rhetorical shift reinforces the premise that invitational rhetoric is one of several rhetorical alternatives, a non-persuasive option to be relied upon when advantageous and appropriate.

Another challenge to invitational rhetoric confronted by Bone et al. is that this communication model is strictly available to women in the face of patriarchal control. For example, Celeste Condit has disparaged invitational rhetoric as gender specific (Bone et al. 441). While aligned with feminist principles, as Foss and Griffin explain, invitational rhetoric is applicable in any situation in which external conditions of personal equality, value, and freedom are realized. Christie's text further illuminates male accessibility to invitational rhetoric as the narrator Leonard Clement frequently offers a perspective without domination. When his wife complains early in the novel about the elderly women who will be gathering for tea at the vicarage, citing last on the list, "that terrible Miss Marple" (Christie, *Vicarage* 5), Clement shares his own assessment of Marple. He replies, "I rather like Miss Marple," noting that "she has, at least, a sense of humour" (Christie, *Vicarage* 5). The narrator's comments indicate his opinion but do not persuade Griselda to his viewpoint. Clement does not insist upon her agreement with him, implying their equitable relationship, his recognition of her value, and her freedom to discern for herself. Jerry Burton also provides space for others to present their perspectives on Lymstock events in *The Moving Finger*. He asks

Aimée Griffith, ““And what are they saying?”” (Christie, *Moving* 149), offering her an opportunity to share her perspectives on the latest rumors in the town. Burton, however, emphasizes listening less, and readers must rely more on the narrator’s reactions. With *A Murder is Announced*, Craddock’s superior, Rydesdale, is described as “in the habit of listening rather than talking,” (Christie, *Moving* 39), suggesting that the external condition of value is utilized by a male authority figure. While, as Marple suggests to Craddock, police make direct inquiries, those who avail themselves of aspects of invitational rhetoric—male or female—obtain information in less formal manners. As Bone et al. note, “women, men, feminists, and nonfeminists can use, do use, and have used invitational rhetoric” (442). While other characters do not enlist the tools of invitational rhetoric as readily as Marple, their examples support Bone et al.’s sentiments.

In their essay, Bone et al. also confront a concern that invitational rhetoric “lacks agency” (445). They write, “the charge regarding a lack of agency and invitational rhetoric exists because, for some critics, there is no agency when no *effort* to change others exists” [italics in original] (Bone et al. 445). However, such a complaint relies on the equalization of rhetoric and persuasion, and Christie’s heuristics actually provide Marple with improved agency and empowerment. Bone et al. describe agency as “the means to act,” allowing that creating “an invitational environment” (445) based on the external conditions of invitational rhetoric provides all involved—rhetors and audience members—with an outlet for equality, value, and self-determination. Because Marple behaves in a civil and traditionally feminine manner, she does not raise the hackles of the male authorities or neighbors and instead encourages them to listen to her interpretations and observations in the murder investigation. The author empowers Marple to maneuver rhetorically in opposition to the biases against her

age and gender, and her character confirms many of the premises that support invitational rhetoric against its criticisms. Her frequent—and successful—use of invitational rhetoric situate Marple in the midst of feminist rhetorical principles, with these texts suggesting that the aging single woman is a shrewd participant in society, rather than useless for her lack of husband and reproduction.

CHAPTER THREE

Gossip

While Spacks notes a variety of interpretations of gossip, she maintains that its definition invariably “involves talk about one or more absent figures; always such talk occurs in a relatively small group” (*Gossip* 4). As described in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the origins of the term “gossip” do not include an association with women, but the evolution of this discourse mode has developed to connote its use by someone, usually female, who wastes time in idle conversations. Therefore, in addition to its alignment with women, gossip is also deemed useless, personal talk. Adkins indicates, “Gossip has until recently been castigated as women’s foolish, petty, backbiting talk about others’ personal lives” (221). Because men dominate the public spheres of discourse, women and other marginalized groups are left to private conversations more common in personal, narrative communications like gossip, a feminized rhetorical space often disregarded as ineffective and insubstantial. As an elderly woman without husband or children, Jane Marple is disregarded by larger society, referred to as “the worst cat in the village” (Christie, *Vicarage* 5), “that old Tabby” (Christie, *Moving* 207), and her ideas considered merely an “old maid’s vapourings” (Christie, *Announced* 102). Therefore, in enlisting casual and informal conversation to resolve murder cases, Marple’s success supports the value of rhetorical modes like gossip. Thus, a feminist reading of the three Marple novels—each of which establishes gossip as a significant discourse mode—exposes the implication that rhetorical strategies commonly associated with women are valid and productive. A feminist reading of gossip in Christie texts recognizes “the traditional link” of gossip with women (Spacks, *Gossip* 46) and considers its worth outside private groups, relying on “private material for public ends”

(Spacks, "In Praise of Gossip" 26). Through private, casual conversation, Marple acquires information and clues to solve the public crime of murder. While an examination of the texts reveals that Christie situates gossip in sometimes contradictory ways based on its community- and knowledge-building capabilities, its power to both exclude and characterize, and its association with gender, each of the selected novels establishes gossip as a significant discourse style through which Marple effectively concludes cases.

Gossip in St. Mary Mead

The introductory scene of *The Murder at the Vicarage* includes Clement, his wife, and his nephew, Dennis, who spend their lunch at the vicarage discussing several village residents, quickly confirming gossip as critical expression. Colonel Protheroe is labelled a "pompous old brute" by Dennis while the vicar's wife asks about the new curate, Mr. Hawes (Christie, *Vicarage* 3). Their engagement in this discourse is informal and familiar among relatives who may safely discuss their neighbors. However, their social banter is soon contradicted when gossip is classified negatively by Griselda Clement who tells her husband that she will be hosting "tea and scandal" (Christie, *Vicarage* 5); her comments preface her duty of hosting an afternoon tea with several single, elderly, female parishioners of St. Mary Mead. Misses Marple, Wetherby, Hartnell, and the widowed Mrs. Price Ridley enjoy Mrs. Clement's hospitality and are joined by the vicar himself well into their conversation. This social setting has already provided an opportunity to scrutinize Marple's employment of invitational rhetoric, but the same conditions of safety and freedom are involved in the discourse of gossip. A feminist reading of gossip in Christie texts recognizes "the traditional link" of women with gossip (Spacks, *Gossip* 46) and considers its worth outside private groups, relying on "private material for public ends" (Spacks, "In Praise of Gossip" 26).

The talk by this small cluster of female friends and neighbors focuses on other people who are not present, supporting scholarly definitions which describe gossip as a personal conversation between two or more individuals about absent others. Further, Spacks posits that gossip functions “as a verbal engagement [which] depends upon and fosters intimacy a mode not of domination but of linkage” (*Gossip* 57). Thus, Marple’s initial scene in the novel reveals intimacy and solidarity among these village residents as Christie’s readers—positioned as eavesdroppers themselves—enter the ongoing discussion when first-person narrator Leonard Clement joins his wife and her guests. Griselda explains that the unmarried Dr. Stone and his single, younger secretary Miss Cram are the current subjects of conversation. The vicar questions the judgments levied by some of his parishioners:

“But surely,” I said, “in these days a girl can take a post in just the same way as a man does.”

“To come away to the country? And stay in the same hotel?” said Mrs. Price Ridley in a severe voice.

Miss Wetherby murmured to Miss Marple in a low voice:

“And all the bedrooms on the same floor . . .”

Miss Hartnell, who is weather-beaten and jolly and much dreaded by the poor, said in a loud, hearty voice:

“The poor man will be caught before he knows where he is. He’s as innocent as a babe unborn, you can see that.”

.....

“Disgusting, I call it,” continued Miss Hartnell, with her usual tactlessness. “The man must be at least twenty-five years older than she is.” (Christie, *Vicarage* 14).

While the single Cram's position as secretary to the unmarried Dr. Stone is verbally examined and questioned, several of the tea drinkers offer their judgments on the circumstances, and the general tone of their commentary is critical and negative, and not very progressive. While Christie's depiction remains conventional and far from feminist, Marple does not criticize the young woman and is therefore perceived as more tolerant and open-minded in her role as the novel's focal character. The gossip also defines acceptable behavior in St. Mary Mead, at least what is acceptable according to this small contingent of senior citizens. As Johnson explains, "we learn our communities' norms, the social allegiances of our cohort, and important reputational information from gossip" (308). Therefore, this conversation portrays community values and attitudes in addition to revealing the relationships among its participants. Their camaraderie situates the speakers as familiar and comfortable with one another, establishing for readers the impression of an existing village society. With their informal conversation, Marple and her neighbors reveal as much about themselves as they do about other villagers, exemplifying Spacks' depiction of gossip's role in "self-revelation as well as exposure of other people's affairs because responses to news matter more than news itself in intimate gossip. By gossiping people know one another" ("In Praise of Gossip" 28). While Marple refrains from judgments, assessments of their subjects through gossip indicate the viewpoints of the elderly set of 1930s British rural life.

This episode of gossip at the vicarage not only introduces several rhetors and their perspectives but also describes additional characters critical to the novel's development. As the vicar, his wife, and their afternoon guests continue their talk, the victim of the pending murder, Protheroe, is established as a quarrelsome man, having had arguments with Dr. Stone and with visiting artist Lawrence Redding. Marple volunteers her own piece of gossip,

explaining that Redding was ejected from Protheroe's residence as "it appears he was painting Lettice [the colonel's daughter] in her bathing dress" (Christie, *Vicarage* 16). Through the conversation, Christie's audience also learns that Protheroe is married to his second wife, Lettice's stepmother, that Mr. Hawes appears worried, and that Dr. Haydock has been to visit Mrs. Lestrangle, a mysterious village newcomer. Readers also find that Marple's home is positioned so she sees visitors to the vicarage who "pass through the garden and go round to the study window" (Christie, *Vicarage* 16). Not only are several relevant characters established through the expositional chit-chat, but Marple's inclination to witness village comings-and-goings is also made clear. The elderly neighbor's stereotypical nosiness is portrayed, as Clement contributes, "Miss Marple always sees everything. Gardening is as good as a smoke screen, and the habit of observing birds through powerful glasses can always be turned to account" (Christie, *Vicarage* 17). A gossipy conversation creates background for the novel.

The discussion at afternoon tea also supports conventional characterizations of gossip which center on women as rhetors, on personal assessments, and social mores, yet Christie's audience is drawn into multiple layers of rhetoric in a personal and intimate way. As Spacks posits, a text's narrator appeals to readers' own concerns for the kinds of subjective and personal details on which gossip centers; the readers are not mere onlookers but are drawn into "a kind of relationship approximating that of gossip" (10). While bringing the audience into group membership, this conversation consists primarily of marginalized elderly women, revealing gossip's alignment with women and its perception as idle chatter, but also illustrating Marple's distance from its traditional maliciousness. With this scene, Christie juxtaposes the customary notion of gossip as negative with its positive implementation.

While it appears as idle commentary by women who have nothing better to do, gossip also connects people and distributes knowledge. Further, a feminist appraisal notes that as the protagonist, Marple, contributes to the conversation but does not pass judgment, denying the negative connotations of gossip's alliance with women. Readers are introduced to the village setting, its standards and morals, a slew of characters who will play roles as the plot continues, and, of course, to the natural inquisitiveness and tolerance of Marple, the elderly sleuth who will solve the case—through gossip.

Gossip in Lymstock

Very early in *The Moving Finger*, Jerry Burton's doctor tells his patient that he will recover from his wounds but recommends that the injured man recuperate in a rural area. He tells Burton, "That's why I say, go down to the country, take a house, get interested in local politics, local scandal, in village gossip. Take an inquisitive and violent interest in your neighbors" (Christie, *Moving* 2). Dr. Kent's words reveal his perspective on gossip as frivolous and inconsequential talk, intended merely to distract the patient from his real physical troubles. The two men exhibit conventional attitudes toward gossip, but the novel's plot soon centers on anonymous, accusatory letters, two murders—and the ensuing gossip that surrounds both.

Burton as narrator primarily introduces the residents of Lymstock to readers as he meets them during his town errands, "for morning in the High Street was a kind of rendezvous for shoppers, where news was exchanged" (Christie, *Moving* 18). Soon, he and his sister Joanna are having tea and playing bridge with neighbors, and gossip is established early in the novel as a means to acquaint newcomers to the small town. As Spacks explains, gossip connects and lets people know each other ("In Praise of Gossip" 28). When Burton

and his sister Joanna go to tea at the local vicarage, they meet an old friend of the vicar's wife. Very soon, Marple is asking questions about the murder of the Symmingtons' maid, Agnes Woddell. The elderly woman soon asks her hostess about local gossip; "'But tell me, dear,' she said to Mrs. Dane Calthrops, 'what do the village people—I mean the townspeople—say? What do *they* think?'" [emphasis in original] (Christie, *Moving* 167). Marple's question reveals her cognizance of the inherent value of the informal, casual discourse of gossip; words passed around may provide some truths. Joanna offers the suspicions of local misfit, Mrs. Cleat, which Marple soon dismisses, instead suggesting that strangers to the community, such as Burton, are likely less affected by personal history and might better be situated to solve the mysteries of the murders and the anonymous letters. By implication, she indicates that an individual less influenced by local information—predominantly gossip—should be able to more objectively investigate the case. However, that outsider proves to be Marple.

Throughout her discussion with the Burtons and the vicar's wife, Marple asks many questions, gaining information about the murder cases, the letters, and other Lymstock residents. For example, Burton repeats to Marple the suspicions of Superintendent Nash, Scotland Yard's specialist in poison pen letters, and shares that Nash reasons more anonymous missives will follow. Through this informal conversation about people and events of Lymstock, the amateur detective also accumulates additional details about recipients of the letters, discovering that Elsie Holland, the Symmingtons' beautiful young nursery governess, has not received any accusatory mail. Marple's reliance on these snippets of information supports Adkins' commentary on "narrative and gossip in knowledge making" as discourse modes which are enlisted with "more traditional means of gaining and

evaluating information” (229). While Nash’s investigation invokes official ways of obtaining information, its details are passed on to Marple through gossip, demonstrating Adkins’ claim that informal narrative and gossip can operate alongside traditional and formal knowledge-making. Throughout her brief appearance in *The Moving Finger*, the amateur detective utilizes the personal and informal discourse—allegedly a woman’s way of talking—to build her knowledge about the small town’s murder cases and the diversions created by the poison pen letters intimating scandalous behavior on the parts of villagers. Nonetheless, Burton’s observations of Marple leaving the police station suggest that she does sometimes engage in more official discussions, demonstrating the elderly detective’s capability of moving between gossip, relegated to marginalized women, and the formal discourse of the male-dominated public world.

Sharing knowledge through informal and familiar conversation is another method through which Marple employs gossip. Chapter fourteen, the novel’s penultimate section, features Marple’s explanation of the recent crimes to a small gathering at the vicarage, as “she laid down her crochet, and delivered a gentle old-maidish dissertation on the murder” (Christie, *Moving* 216). She walks her listeners through the cases, enlightening them about the diversionary letters, intended to distract from the murder of Mrs. Symmington, and recognizes that a woman familiar with the town’s true gossip would never have written them. She clarifies, ““Even in peaceful Lymstock there are plenty of scandals, and I can assure you any *woman* living the place would have known about them and used them. But a man, you see, isn’t interested in gossip in the same way ...” [emphasis in original] (Christie, *Moving* 216). Marple’s own words return gossip to the realm of women, suggesting that had a woman written those incriminating letters, she would have known the true scandals of the town’s

residents. Here Christie's text indicates that women place greater value on information gained through informal and narrative routes, implying that men, while they may gossip, tend to disregard its worth and therefore would not have the knowledge necessary to include factual details. Throughout the novel, Burton gains intelligence through gossip and his reliance on such casual talk disrupts the customary alignment of rumor and hearsay with women. However, he is unable to solve the crime. Marple, though, who values the nuances of meaning gained through other people's conversations and experiences, is able to identify the real murderer. The implication is that gossip's epistemological characteristics are useful to those who are cognizant of its worth.

Gossip in Chipping Cleghorn

With *A Murder is Announced*, informal communications are not limited to verbal dissemination. In the pages of the *North Benham News and Chipping Cleghorn Gazette*, residents of the small community of Chipping Cleghorn find their local news. Christie writes:

After a cursory glance at the Correspondence (in which the passionate hates and feuds of rural life found full play), nine out of ten subscribers then turned to the PERSONAL column. Here were grouped together higgledy-piggledy articles for Sale or Wanted, frenzied appeals for Domestic Help, innumerable insertions regarding dog, announcements concerning poultry and gaming equipment; and various other items of an interesting nature to those living in the small community of Chipping Cleghorn. (Christie, *Announced 2*)

While not considered "gossip," the personals column provides similar kinds of intimate information about the activities of community residents, and a personal advertisement in this column becomes the subject of much gossip as the novel begins with reactions of several

local residents to the announcement of a murder to “take place on Friday, October 29th, at Little Paddocks at 6:30 p.m.” (Christie, *Announced* 5). When Friday arrives, Little Paddocks—the country home of Letitia Blacklock shared by her young adult cousins, Patrick and Julia, and her childhood friend, Dora Bunner—is visited by a number of inquisitive acquaintances who seek to learn the meaning of the advertisement. When a mysterious intruder appears, the lights go out, and shots are fired. Blacklock is slightly injured by a gunshot grazing her ear, but it is the stranger who lies dead, apparently shot with the revolver discovered lying nearby. The investigating police officers learn that the dead man, Rudi Scherz, was employed at the Royal Spa Hotel, where Marple is taking treatments for her rheumatism while lodging at yet another vicarage with the daughter of an old friend, the vicar’s wife, Diana “Bunch” Harmon.

Her hostess eventually takes Marple to tea at Little Paddocks where, “The little old lady was charming in her gentle gossipy fashion” (Christie, *Announced* 130). During this casual visit, Marple benignly leads the informal conversation with Blacklock and Bunner to topics that reveal details relevant to Scherz’s intrusion and subsequent death. By sharing her own—real or feigned—concerns about burglars, the amateur sleuth learns of the lack of security features at Little Paddocks—the residents rarely lock their doors—and turns the discussion to Scherz’s recent break-in and death. “‘The hold-up you had must have been very, very frightening,’ said Miss Marple. ‘Bunch has been telling me all about it’” (Christie, *Announced* 131), implying that recent events and the people involved have already been the subjects of gossip between Harmon and Marple.

A little later, Bunner inadvertently reveals that Detective Inspector Craddock in an earlier visit had checked an unused door and found that its hinges had been secretly oiled. When

Blacklock comments that the detective inspector might prefer those details not be revealed, Harmon responds with, ““We won’t breathe a word, will we, Aunt Jane”” (Christie, *Announced* 131), implying a clandestine bargain to reduce the spread of gossip. However, Christie’s audience is fully aware that the visit is more than simple neighborliness on Marple’s part.

Marple continues her curious snooping, behavior she has previously described to Craddock as expected of an older woman, and asks about the scene of the crime, which happens to be the room where the women are having tea, and is even shown the bullet holes from the shooting. The conversation continues as Marple harmlessly asks about tables and lamps, all the while gathering knowledge which will later be reviewed and pondered as clues. Through what seems to be innocent conversation, Marple learns that Blacklock has few photographs of her young cousins, a detail which leads to further inquiries by both Marple and Craddock. These informal talks vaguely refer to people not present—such as Scherz and Craddock—and bear the earmarks of gossip as Marple utilizes their conversations about others to gain trust and bond with her new acquaintances.

In her prying, Marple makes morning rounds in Chipping Cleghorn. Pausing before shop windows, she sees Bunner enter the Bluebird Tearooms and Café and follows to be invited to share the other woman’s table. While their conversation begins with talk of various ailments, Marple soon steers the discussion toward people who are not present but whom both women know. She inquires after the pretty girl who does gardening and her marital history, asks about the tall young man with spectacles, and wonders if there might be a romance brewing between the two, before asking Bunner about her longtime friendship with Blacklock. All the while, Marple is a pleasant and agreeable companion; she “nodded her

white head sympathetically” (Christie, *Announced* 153) and is described as speaking “gently” on several occasions. The behavior of the amateur detective encourages her companion to speak openly and confidentially, attesting to Adkins’ description of gossip as “emerg[ing] at least partially through a relationship of trust—when we trust someone, we allow ourselves to say more than we might to a stranger” (228). Marple’s unassuming and compassionate behavior encourages Bunner’s intimacy, and the kindly elderly woman also learns about Blacklock’s previous career as a financial secretary and requests from her cousin Patrick for money. Bunner and Marple share general comments about the carelessness of young people in their talk of Patrick and Julia, and Bunner describes coming upon Patrick in the shrubbery with “an oily cup” (Christie, *Announced* 157), throwing readers’ suspicions on his behavior. Further, she shares overheard details of “a very curious conversation” between Patrick and Julia, intimating a quarrel between the brother and sister (Christie, *Announced* 157) but also noting her own misgivings that Patrick may have tampered with a lamp and caused the lights to go out on the night of Scherz’s death. While many of Bunner’s comments are shaded by her own interpretations, Marple manages to gain clues to the case. The chatting is interrupted when Blacklock appears and questions Bunner, ““Coffee and gossip, Bunny?’ said Miss Blacklock, with quite a shade of reproach in her voice”” (Christie, *Announced* 158). Blacklock was comfortable in speaking openly with Marple, Bunner, and Harmon in her home but is very negative in her response to Bunner’s private talk with Marple. These facts later prove relevant as Marple’s investigation continues.

However, Marple’s inquisitiveness does not go unnoticed. At Bunner’s birthday gathering at Little Paddocks, Julia comments that she is glad Harmon and ““old Miss Marple couldn’t come,”” explaining ““that old woman is the prying kind”” (Christie, *Announced*

181). While Marple's gossiping ways have not gone unnoticed, her unassuming and gentle manner keeps anyone from suspecting that she might be deliberately seeking information in an investigation of the crimes. Craddock's supervisor, Rydesdale, later tells the detective inspector that "Miss Marple has been active . . . she had morning coffee at the Bluebird. She's been to sherry at Boulders, and to tea at Little Paddocks. She's admired Mrs. Swettenham's garden—and dropped in to see Colonel Easterbrook's Indian curios" (Christie, *Announced* 191). Socializing and chatting casually with village residents, Marple relies on informal conversations to participate in the community and gain knowledge leading to the resolution of the criminal case.

Gossip, so frequently relegated to the "backstage" and diminished by its affiliation with women, once again proves productive in apprehending the murderer. While Marple solves the case, Christie does not limit gossip as discourse to women only. From the personals column in the local newspaper to the Bluebird Tearooms and Café, residents of the small town of Chipping Cleghorn interest themselves in the affairs of others, even to the point of arriving uninvited at Little Paddocks out of curiosity about the impending murder, all attesting to Adkins' observation that "social practices of narratives are [common] in construction of knowledge" (215). Christie's text plays with the conventional idea that gossip is women's talk, sometimes allowing it to remain within the feminine sphere but also realizing its significance within the broader community, defying sexist perspectives of intimate and informal conversation as only a woman's means of understanding the world.

Gossip & Gender

Despite its clear and apparent usefulness in both building solidarity and knowledge as illustrated in all three novels, Christie provides sometimes contradictory associations of

gossip with gender. With the afternoon tea gathering at *The Murder at the Vicarage*, the only male member of the social group—also the novel’s storyteller—reflects conventional attitudes toward gossip. Clement generalizes the conversation with, “Three female voices rose at once making disconnected remarks about the Choir Boys’ Outing, the regrettable incident at the last Mother’s Meeting, and the draughts in the church” (*Vicarage* 14-15), adhering to a usual view of gossip as rather inconsequential. The denunciation of gossip as frivolous may arise from what Spacks describes as the “collective as well as individual force” such intimate conversations promote; “social condemnation of the female activity of lengthy, trivial conversation may reflect anxiety about the dimensions of its power” (“In Praise of Gossip” 30). Unlike customary rhetorical forms which rely on persuasion and domination by a rhetor, gossip is a means of communication in which rhetors share not only words but also social concerns and issues. The female characters discuss what matters to them on a personal level while also revealing broader social norms and viewpoints, uniting them as a “collective force,” which shares a private history, one that men both disregard and fear.

Further evidence of negative male attitudes of the association of gossip with women is also depicted in *The Murder at the Vicarage*. Although the vicar introduces Marple with positive commentary on her character, Inspector Slack devalues the “spinsters” of St. Mary Mead, referring to Marple as “one of these gossiping old cats [who] had nothing better to do than look out of her window ...” (Christie, *Vicarage* 224). Male anxiety about harmless little old ladies is overt. Spacks makes clear the masculine connection of gossip with malice, noting that men link gossip “more often with danger” and that “knowledge about other people is power over them” (Spacks, “In Praise of Gossip” 30-31). The worth of such elderly and unmarried women is further questioned by Colonel Melchett who tells Clement,

“women like that always think they know everything” (Christie, *Vicarage* 253). Slack and Melchett’s words degrade gossip and its users as inferior, likely out of fear for the possibility of usurping masculine power, because, as Johnson states, “gossip can be important in the epistemic lives of unfairly subordinated agents ... by allowing for the transmission of risky information in a private and safe way. This can allow subordinated group members to interrupt, defend against or react to their subordination” (314). Thus, when Marple—a subordinate woman—relies on gossip as one means to solve the case, she defiantly but obliquely confronts male anxiety, outwitting even the professional sleuths who happen to be male.

Christie also supplies evidence that gossip is not limited to the purvey of women. From its first scene and throughout the mystery, *The Murder at the Vicarage* features male narrator Clement involved in informal and personal conversations about other characters who are not present, often with Marple. The elderly sleuth sends Redding off to gossip with the female servants of Protheroe’s house to gain additional evidence on the case, and even Marple’s visiting nephew, “a brilliant novelist [who] has made quite a name as poet” (Christie, *Vicarage* 186), is occupied by talk of the recent murder. While Raymond West, cigarette in hand, condemns St. Mary Mead “as a stagnant pool” (Christie, *Vicarage* 187), his Aunt Jane soon reveals his interest in the latest events of the small village. Christie writes, “Miss Marple, however, gave her nephew away by remarking: ‘Raymond and I have been discussing nothing else all through dinner’” (Christie, *Vicarage* 188). These instances reveal male concern for the kinds of details and knowledge shared in personal, intimate conversations while the male characters overtly deny either participation in or the value of

gossip. The men do not want to appear intrigued by topics which are generally considered female territory, because gossip is considered women's talk

In *The Moving Finger*, Burton's attending physician in Lymstock, Owen Griffith, explains to his patient what he has heard about the incriminating letters, and they talk about Joanna, local solicitor Symmington, and Miss Ginch, reflecting an interest in the missives and the residents about whom they talk. In this context, gossip is not associated with women. Instead two men engage in personal talk about other residents known to both rhetors but who are not present during the conversation, supporting the scholarly definition of gossip. Their conversation further establishes relevant individuals and situational details necessary to the plot. While the novels' characters give voice to the perception of gossip as a womanly endeavor, many of the males engage in such personal and informal talk. Irony develops as, continuing to denounce gossip in its association with women, male characters nonetheless engage in small talk about their neighbors.

With *A Murder is Announced*, gossip is not only associated with women but particularly with elderly women. Detective Inspector Craddock expresses concern for the Marple's safety and implores her not to nose about; "But—but don't snoop around ... I have a feeling—I have really—that it isn't *safe*," he tells her [emphasis in original] (Christie, *Announced* 125). Marple smiles and says in response:

"But I'm afraid ... that we old women always do snoop. It would be very odd and much more noticeable if I didn't. Questions about mutual friends in different parts of the world and whether they remember so and so, and do they remember who it was that Lady Somebody's daughter married? All that helps, doesn't it?"

"Helps?" said the Inspector, rather stupidly.

“Helps to find out if people are who they say they are?,” said Miss Marple.

(Christie, *Announced* 125-6).

With these few words, Marple describes the value of casual networks of discourse—gossip—the sort of channels with which the amateur sleuth has already shown familiarity in earlier narratives. She goes on to explain to Craddock how village life has changed:

“Fifteen years ago one knew who everybody was If somebody new came to live there, they brought letters of introduction, or they’d been in the same regiment or served in the same ship as someone there already. If anybody new—really new—really a stranger—came, well, they stuck out—everybody wondered about them and didn’t rest until they found out.” (Christie, *Announced* 126)

With this scene, Marple both strengthens gossip’s association with elderly women who serve as social busybodies and describes the importance of gossip in establishing community and gathering knowledge. Once again, Christie allows gossip contradictory status within a narrative. Marple embodies the relationship of women with gossip, supporting Spacks’ suggestion that “the term ‘female gossip’ hardly exists: the noun now assumes gender—not only because women gossip, but, more importantly, because gossip is the *sort* of thing women do” [emphasis in original] (Spacks, “In Praise of Gossip” 22). Despite this conventional perception, these Christie texts also reveal gossip’s use by male characters. Clement, West, Burton, and Griffith are among the men who engage in safe and casual small talk about others while disregarding gossip’s influence and “the revelatory power of the small, shared truth” (Spacks “In Praise of Gossip” 24). Relegated to the backstage and therefore used to relying on alternative rhetorical methods, female characters like Marple sense the importance of this “knowledge that emerges from relationship with others” (Adkins

217), which might be ignored by those who typically rely on more structured and formal discourse.

Gossip & Power

The texts also demonstrate gossip's power to unite and divide members within a community, a power that Marple comprehends, urging others to be cautious with its misuse. In *The Murder at the Vicarage*, Vicar Clement questions Marple about the dangers of gossip. He suggests, ““Don't you think, Miss Marple ... that we're all inclined to let our tongues run away with us too much. Charity thinketh no evil, you know. Inestimable harm may be done by foolish wagging of tongues in ill-natured gossip”” (Christie, *Vicarage* 18). The vicar's statements imply a recognition of the negative attributes of gossip but ignorance of its positive characteristics of trust and safety. Marple, though, responds with, ““I dare say that idle tittle-tattle is very wrong and unkind, but it is so often true, isn't it?”” (Christie, *Vicarage* 18). Marple's words illustrate Spacks' statement that, “gossip involves not only fact, but interpretations; not just facts, but facts organized into stories; not just stories, but stories located in private history” (“In Praise of Gossip 30). Marple's ability to gossip and interpret facts and stories allow her to distinguish the truth behind the private histories of others, particularly those who commit murder.

Additionally, while female gossip provides the introduction of characters in the early pages of the novel, gossip also functions in other ways in this episode. As Guendouzi indicates, gossip can be both cooperative and competitive, with competition arising from an individual's desire for acceptance by other members of the group (30). Griselda Clement exemplifies this desire for acceptance despite her earlier denigration of gossip. While the vicar's wife has previously criticized the sort of scandalous conversation she expects with her

elderly visitors, she is sometimes left out of the sharing because she is both young and new to the village. However, Griselda Clement attempts to join the talk by inventing her own narrative about Mrs. Lestrangle.

“I happen to *know*,” said Griselda impressively. “Her husband was a missionary. Terrible story. He *was eaten*, you know. Actually eaten. And she was forced to become the chief’s head wife. Dr. Haydock was with an expedition and rescued her.”

For a moment excitement was rife, then Miss Marple said reproachfully, but with a smile: “Naughty girl!”

She tapped Griselda reprovably on the arm.

“Very unwise thing to do, my dear. If you make up these things, people are quite likely to believe them. And sometimes that leads to complications.” (Christie, *Vicarage* 17).

In attempting to contribute to the discourse, the young wife pretends that she has knowledge unknown to her guests and speaks “impressively,” implying greater importance to her words. While Griselda is making light of the nature of their discourse, she is also actively competing with the other women. In her attempts to gain social approval, Griselda disregards the cooperative principle of gossip, creating lies to enhance her standing—perhaps also making fun of the older women’s gossip—and the elderly Marple admonishes her gently for the fabricated effort. Despite her earlier critical attitude about the women’s conversation, Griselda seeks to join in, collaborating ineffectually but demonstrating what Johnson describes as the human craving to belong because “gossip increases group cohesion and member satisfaction” (307).

Additionally, while gossip may rely on the interpretation of facts, it must rely on facts, according to Marple. While the conversation at afternoon tea establishes gossip in its customary light, as an informal discourse mode employed primarily by women, such rhetoric reveals itself to be much more complex than “idle tittle-tattle.” After the murder, Marple, recognizing the complexity and power of gossip, tells the vicar and his wife:

“I dare say everyone thinks it is somebody different. That is why it is so important to have *proofs*. I, for instance, am quite *convinced* I know who did it. But I must admit I haven’t one shadow of proof. One must, I know, be very careful of what one says at a time like this—criminal libel, don’t they call it? I had made up my mind to be *most* careful with Inspector Slack” [emphasis in original] (Christie, *Vicarage* 53-54).

Marple again cautions others against the misuse of gossip when based on hearsay without evidence, guarding themselves from potential libel and protecting others from unnecessary suspicion. In effect, the elderly character warns that such intimate talk can be dangerous and that gossip is powerful. Despite Marple’s recognition of gossip’s potential, she is also willing to communicate through official channels, speaking both formally and informally with the police—but only after she has accumulated enough facts to support her assertions.

Gossip’s power to influence perceptions of others is evinced in *The Moving Finger*. Village concerns of the damage gossip can do to reputations are established with the receipt of unsigned poison pen letters, reproaching local residents for a variety of iniquities. However, when the gossip leads to concerns about reputations, women become central to the conversations, implying that they have more to lose when gossip is negative discourse. The Burtons’ young maid, Beatrice, who comes in as “daily help” (Christie, *Moving* 16) stays

away because of such a letter's "insinuations" about herself and Jerry Burton (Christie, *Moving* 17). Beatrice's mother visits Burton and tells him, "There is no need to tell me, sir, that what was wrote was all wicked lies Wicked untruthful lies it was, but all the same I says to Beatrice as she'd better leave because you know what talk is, sir. No smoke without fire, that's what people say. And a girl can't be too careful ..." (Christie, *Moving* 46). Fear of the negative impact of gossip on the young woman's reputation causes the Bakers to agree that she should not return to work for the Burtons. However, Joanna Burton reacts differently to the letter she receives, suggesting that she and Jerry are really lovers, not brother and sister. Joanna laughs off the letter's accusations; an upper-class worldly woman—planning only a temporary stay in Lymstock—denies gossip's potential power over her.

Reputation is at the heart of gossip about another Lymstock resident. Mrs. Cleat, identified as "the local witch," depends on informal, narrative channels of communication to build on her own standing in the community (Christie, *Moving* 50). Portrayed as mysterious and strange, Cleat is the subject of small talk, again between Burton and his local doctor. Griffith explains, "I'm afraid she's taken pains to cultivate the legend. She's a queer woman with a bitter and sardonic sense of humor. It's been easy enough for her, if a child cut its finger, or had a bad fall, or sickened with mumps, to nod her head" and note that the child had stolen apples from her or had bothered her cat (Christie, *Moving* 50). Cleat benefits from superstitions about her because other women would keep their children away and gift her with honey and cakes to stay on her good side. Later, Christie's readers learn—through gossip—that Cleat engages in activities such as gathering herbs during the full moon "and takes care that everybody in the place knows about it" (Christie, *Moving* 168). In this way, the odd woman employs gossip not to collaborate or join with her community but instead to

separate herself from it. A feminist interpretation of this situation recognizes that a marginalized and vulnerable individual—a poor, elderly, widowed woman—depends on alternative rhetorical modes to gain a sense of authority for herself within her community. For Cleat, gossip allows her some agency within a world in which she might otherwise be powerless.

Gossip as Backstage Talk

The “backstage” nature of personal discourse is further demonstrated in the gossip of other individuals who are somewhat demeaned and disregarded by mainstream society. Information is passed along through informal and personal communication channels as the servants—again mostly women—of St. Mary Mead contribute to rhetoric surrounding the murder case, and again Marple is cognizant of its value. Clarifying the facts of Protheroe’s murder in *The Murder in the Vicarage*, the elderly sleuth explains, “Your maid distinctly stated that Mr. Redding was only in the house a couple of minutes, not long enough, surely, for a quarrel such as you describe. And then again, I understand the Colonel was shot through the back of the head while he was writing a letter—at least that is what my maid told me” (Christie, *Vicarage* 56). At this point early in the novel, Marple has clearly relied on the “backstage” gossip of domestics to piece together details of the crime, and her comments represent Maryann Ayim explanation of the tendency of gossip “to allow practitioners to exchange private information in a uniquely safe way” (qtd. in Johnson 314). Little old ladies, like Marple, and servants are social subordinates able to safely communicate through gossip with “its special value as a resource for the oppressed and dispossessed” (Spacks, *Gossip* 15).

Later in the novel, Clement and the artist Lawrence Redding talk with Marple in her garden. Redding informally questions the elderly woman about who and what she may have

seen at the time of the murder, further demonstrating that men as well as women might utilize informal and personal discourse modes. After sharing her own knowledge of the comings and goings of her neighbors, the elderly woman advises Redding where to go next for further details on the murder.

“I expect someone overheard something, though, don’t you?” said Miss Marple. “I mean, somebody always does. I think that is where Mr. Redding may find out something.”

“But Mrs. Protheroe knows nothing.”

“I didn’t mean Ann Protheroe,” said Miss Marple. “I meant the women servants. They do so hate telling anything to the police. But a nice looking young man—you’ll excuse me, Mr. Redding—and one who has been unjustly suspected—oh! I’m sure they’d tell him at once.” (Christie, *Vicarage* 149)

While some of Marple’s knowledge about the murder stems from her ability to piece together information from her own observations, she relies heavily on details learned through the informal networks of behind-the-scenes talk as demonstrated in these conversations. Henry Abelove states that gossip “is an indispensable resource for those who are in any sense or measure disempowered” (qtd. in VanHaitsma 135). As depicted in the Marple texts, gossip is a discourse mode easily accessible for those who are devalued and kept from overt authority, whether they be aging, single women or women serving as domestic help.

Servants, the “backstage” employees, are at the forefront of gossip in *A Murder is Announced*. The innocuous Marple replies to Blacklock’s comments about the lack of secrets in small communities like Chipping Cleghorn with:

“Now that is very true,” said Miss Marple. “I’m afraid, you know, that things do get round in the most extraordinary way. Servants, of course, and yet it can’t be only that, because one has so few servants nowadays. Still, there are the daily women and perhaps they are worse, because they go to everybody in turn and pass the news round.” (Christie, *Announced* 132).

Quite basically, Marple comments on the nature of gossip in a small town. She shares her awareness that information travels through informal and intimate routes often via women and particularly female servants, those who are marginalized and often perceived as unseen in households. Individuals on whom Marple frequently relies for details in her unofficial murder investigations.

Later Marple explains to Craddock the nature of formal and informal communications. When he fails to understand her allusions, she asks plainly, ““After all ... you *are* the Police, aren’t you? People can’t say everything they’d like to say to the Police, can they?”” [emphasis in original] (Christie, *Announced* 214). The detective inspector assumes that the only reason to keep information from the police is if someone has ““some criminal matter to conceal”” (Christie, *Announced* 214). While Marple is merely alluding to the slightly illegal informal trading and bartering among residents, her comment also demonstrates the advantages of private gossip over more public routes of conversation, such as official police questioning. Marple’s intimate and informal discourse—gossip—communicates information which seems trivial in its details but is relevant to a larger understanding of human activities. Agatha Christie’s amateur detective relies on elements of gossip to successfully identify criminals and return communities to their pre-murder status.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion & Implications

Because Agatha Christie's Jane Marple successfully depends on elements of invitational rhetoric and gossip, the character confirms that discourse modes associated with women are effective and productive, engaging with a feminist rhetorical agenda, as illustrated through this study. Marple appears to conform to expectations, and Christie's texts overtly submit to genre conventions; however, opposition underlies apparent compliance. As Eden Leone notes, Marple's "gender, age, and supposed fragility are a contention throughout most of the works. Somehow an old biddy does not convey the necessary acumen to solve mysteries. Yet it is exactly this perception which allows her to move about undetected in order to gain knowledge" (13). In fact, Marple is exactly as she appears: gentle, unassuming, and elderly. However, her reliance on non-traditional discourse modes implies a subtle defiance on Christie's part. As Spacks explains, "Miss Marple exemplifies the passive woman generating power through female conversation" (*Gossip* 230). Marple seems passive but achieves agency through her conversational strategies as described within this project. Therefore, Christie, whose work seems so conventional, upsets traditional perceptions, empowering Marple through feminist elements of rhetoric yet also allowing male characters some implementation of the same tools. However, Marple is the only character to demonstrate these tools to their greatest effect as she is the character who solves the crimes, permitting Christie to upset conventions while overtly obeying the rules of her genre and society.

This project falls within the context of existing debates regarding Agatha Christie's Jane Marple, most existing within the parameters of literary scholarship. While Mary Jane

Jones maintains that Marple falls short of being a feminist because she does not appear to challenge male reasoning, Earl F. Bargainnier responds that Marple “is a liberated woman” (113), focusing on Christie’s characterization of Marple but not addressing the elderly sleuth’s rhetorical strategies. While the conversation between these two articles offers a perspective on the discussion of feminism and Christie’s popular detective, the current study supports the validity of Marple’s use of rhetorical modes associated with women, a validity denied by Jones and ignored by Bargainnier in their respective articles.

Returning to Meyer’s classification of feminist rhetorical studies as either disrupting rhetorical paradigms or including women in the study of rhetoric, this project in some ways falls within both categories. This analysis of alternative modes of discourse—invitational rhetoric and gossip—confronts existing perceptions of what constitutes rhetoric. Despite Christie’s popularity, her work has rarely been examined within the context of rhetoric, thus analyzing her texts through rhetorical definitions is a means of adding this woman writer to the larger study of rhetoric.

Among the implications of this investigation is the possibility of validating texts which are customarily subordinated to the literary canon and of broadening the current body of women’s literature. Scholarly rhetorical review as presented in this project demonstrates that such novels of popular literature are neither simplistic nor one-dimensional. Further, Christie might warrant academic study by virtue of her popularity alone. As K.D.M. Snell attests, the “elderly spinster fond of knitting, observation, and English village gossip” may well be the “best known fictional character” in the world (21). Christie’s words traverse the globe as the third most published author of all time. The application of rhetorical scholarship provides additional vantages from which to comprehend the popularity of such cultural texts.

Additional propositions revolve around the rhetorical strategies utilized by Marple. Through their proposal, Foss and Griffin identify invitational rhetoric as non-persuasive and lacking coercion but allow that it may alter audience perspectives. However, emphasis is on the lack of intention to cause such change. Unable to ascertain another's motives, we find that an examination of invitational rhetoric must rely on analysis of its tools in use. For example, Marple offers perspectives without force and depends on external conditions of safety, value, and freedom. Her intentions are likely not to modify the attitudes of her listeners, but her motives involve the resolution of the criminal cases which she investigates. This study notes that Marple is an example of describing invitational rhetoric, not based on goals, but on actions. Another implication of this examination includes the recovery of gossip as an often productive discourse mode. While gossip's degradation in its association with women implies only its negative contexts, it is a communication strategy whose analysis opens up and challenges conventional rhetorical standards. Additionally, gossip and invitational rhetoric frequently rely on spaces deemed safe and trust-filled, and the parallels may be worth further inquiry.

Ultimately, a feminist rhetorical reading of Christie's Marple recognizes her use of unconventional discourse modes within an overtly conventional context. Challenging patriarchal social dominance through the rhetorical devices of invitational rhetoric and gossip, Christie, by means of her elderly amateur detective, obliquely challenges the patriarchal construction of rhetoric within early twentieth-century British society.

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Vita

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