

# Criminal Sleight of Hand: The Detective Magician as Transitional Figure

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## ABSTRACT

The detective magician, an American subgenre, was popularized by several series characters between 1935 and 1945. This decade comprises a meeting point between different strains of detective fiction: the waning years of the Golden Age, a highpoint of hard-boiled pulp detectives, and the rise of the espionage novel. Following Ernest Mandel's general chronology from *Delightful Murder*, I argue that the detective magician serves as a transitional figure who embodies contradictory impulses: the conflation of mystification and demystification, the supernatural and the rational, and justice and criminality. After a preliminary discussion of magic's self-dividedness, I review the overlap between magic, theology, and science in the context of the nineteenth century, moving from there to the interrelation of these threads with detective fiction. Important theoretical writers include Simon During and Michael Saler. I then explain why stage magic is an appropriate vehicle to represent these contradictions through discussions of exemplary detective stories by G. T. Fleming-Roberts, Walter Gibson, Clayton Rawson, and Sax Rohmer.

**KEYWORDS:** magic and magicians in literature, detective fiction, pulps, criminality, ideology

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## I. The Ambivalence of Magic

Magic, though ancient and culturally universal, has frequently been regarded in the West as an equivocal practice (Christopher and Christopher 7; Clarke 18)—unphilosophical, irreligious, and more recently, unscientific. Philosopher and magician Lawrence Hass contends that the “intellectual structure” behind the disparagement of magic presumes a “hierarchical binary between philosophy and magic—a binary that gets reiterated between ‘religion and magic’ and ‘science and magic’” (14), one in which magic always remains subordinate. The popular understanding of magic is also divided, evident in the distinction between natural magic and stage magic—the former consisting of attempts to control nature through spells, incantations, rituals, and other esoteric practices; the latter a self-consciously deceptive performance intended to entertain and produce wonder. The fluid boundary between the two is, for Robert Neale, evidence that effective stage magicians are the secular outgrowth of a priestly predecessor (224), and therefore, in its incorporation of epiphany and thaumaturgy, performance magic serves as more than mere diversion; the magician potentially addresses profound existential concerns.

The conjunction of calculation, performance and astonishing effects, other-worldly powers and the satisfaction of psychological needs is not only the province of the magician, but also that of many fictional detectives. The detective puts anxieties to rest or facilitates rites of passage through extraordinary, even magical, displays of prowess. Such effects may astound, yet most detectives invoke specialized domains of knowledge and practice to legitimate their investigations, as they follow procedures derived from medicine, jurisprudence, or the natural sciences (Freeman’s Thorndyke, Reeve’s Kennedy, Futrelle’s Van Dusen) or employ psychological taxonomies of personality types (Chesterton’s Father Brown, Christie’s Miss Marple, Mitchell’s Mrs. Bradley). By invoking scientific methods or classificatory schemes, they erect a veneer of positivist rationalism which conceals the internal workings of the investigation’s operations. These legitimizing devices misdirect in ways similar to those used by magicians, who also refrain from divulging the secrets behind their tricks. The detective, the magician, and the scientist are linked in the sense that they define themselves to some degree against a backdrop of irrationalism in the production of results. This relationship suggests an analogy: natural magic is to stage magic what the

theologian is to the scientifically-competent detective of fiction. This assertion finds support in the work of Simon During, a leading figure in the critical assessment of magic. During argues that “the logic of secular magic is describable only in relation to a magic with supernatural purpose” (3), a site of cultural conflict in the nineteenth-century rise of stage magic. The fictional detective, a figure whose own mid-nineteenth century appearance coincides with an accelerated, all-encompassing secularization, employs the tools of reason and disciplinary knowledge, but in doing so, generates miraculous effects. At the same time, the detective serves as a scientifically-informed reference point to establish the conditions for meaning in a world lacking transcendental authority: the comforts of faith remain even though rational methods are invoked.

The detective’s priestly role has been explored in detail by Robert Paul, who argues that the detective’s preoccupation with grand themes like good and evil, truth, justice, and civilization “are ultimately grounded in theology, or in what serves as theology in a professedly secular society” (7). Paul maintains that readers, though unaware of this connection, rely upon the theological substrate to recognize moral and ethical concepts as concepts. More in line with my argument, the detective’s compelling theological significance is his link to the sacred and consequently to the taboo. Like his socially-reprehensible opponent, the detective “has devoted himself to a life of crime” (Woods 105), which unavoidably involves shady associations and occasional moral transgressions. In this guise the detective is authorized to engage the prohibition safely, but proximity also blocks full social integration. Unsurprisingly, detectives are frequently portrayed as eccentric (brimming with arcane knowledge, celibate or asexual, indifferent to money or fame), thereby offering a structural parallel to the social deviants they oppose. But social alienation in many cases does not so much arise from existential angst as from formal necessity—the criminal must not be overly sympathetic in the flaunting of proscriptions, murder being the most serious, but the detective, too, must be sufficiently outside the frame of events—both to obtain to a privileged vantage and to evade the universal guilt that frequently tars the major characters with the suspect brush.

Running parallel to this theology-detection pairing, and also within the context of magic, is the link between shaman and scientist. The timeline of natural magic constructed by late nineteenth-century ethnographers,

anthropologists, and psychologists, such as James Frazer, Marcel Mauss, Joseph Jastrow, and Norman Triplett, typically represented magic as a form of pre-science (see especially Triplett 449-52). The persistence of superstition or the willingness to believe in a supernatural basis for magic in modern times was regarded as evolutionary retrogression (Jastrow, “Psychology of Spiritualism” 567; Mauss 13; Triplett 440-45), hearkening to a stage of development surmounted by modern scientific achievements. Viewing magic in entirely secular terms is a relatively late outgrowth of the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment, a belated consequence of these movements’ popularization. Historians have offered a detailed picture of how scientific demonstrations overlapped, sometimes in the same performance, with thaumaturgic spectacle throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Nadis 14-19; Dawes 61-82). During this transitional period, phenomena like electricity and X-rays were not only entertaining; they were not clearly differentiated from trickery. Nineteenth-century magicians commonly “saw themselves as part of a modern scientific world” (Lachapelle, “From” 319), and their illusions relied upon technological innovations that they themselves sometimes had designed and constructed. The construction of an educational ambiance and persona, with appropriate attire and professorial patter, was an effective strategy by which performers distinguished themselves from the “vulgar” cup-and-ball operator to produce the “recognizable accoutrements of new middle-class refinement” and respectability (J. Cook 26). Simultaneously, the social meanings of secular magic were increasingly obscured by post-Enlightenment explanations foregrounding the preeminence of reason and scientific progress. By the mid-twentieth century, Jacob Bronowski could claim that natural magic and science operate within two entirely different forms of logic, with that of science being the only one possessing legitimacy (11-12). But increasingly, by the 1980s, theorists like Eugene Burger and Robert Neale point to a “magical substrate” (61) in the very fields responsible for the skeptical dismissal of magic, particularly in psychology, economics, linguistics, and theology—and, I would add, criminology. The spiritual impoverishment resulting from scientific reductionism leads us, in During’s words, to correct an “insufficiency of being” (26) that arises from worldviews which portray life as a set of classifiable facts. But exposing the magical blind spot within scientific positivism is more than a call to re-enchant a world divested of wonder; it also discloses an ideological substrate of norms and social interests inscribed in disciplinary practices. The

nineteenth-century detective is situated in a critical period of socioeconomic transformation, serving the dominant culture's threatened interests with an enchanted science.

From the genre's emergence in Poe to its refashioning in Doyle, the need for investigative magic emerges in response to widespread social disappointments. The detective story's increased popularity occurred during an era of increasing *dis-enchantment*, understood in its Weberian sense (Saler, "Modernity" 695). Partly in response to the relentless bureaucratization of their world, many Victorians embraced occult knowledge and ceremonies, and, among the middle classes, these practices were frequently viewed as compatible with scientific inquiry, a point well-attested by modern scholars (Butler viii-ix; D. Evans 23; Thruschwell 1). For Michael Saler, the fields of "spiritualism, occultism, and psychical research" offered a welcome outlet in a world emptied of "communal beliefs and higher ideals," one "dominated by positivism and materialism" ("Clap" 602). Saler maintains that the embrace of modernity did not inevitably cause disenchantment, but that when disenchantment arose, "it was equated with a narrow, instrumental rationality and a hollow, expanding secularism" ("Modernity" 695). Under these circumstances, characters like Sherlock Holmes offered a coping strategy. Ostensibly an agent of demystification, Holmes served to re-enchant a domain increasingly suffused with "capitalist instrumental rationality and the growth of the bureaucratic state," though doing so "without compromising the central tenets of modernity: rationalism, secularism, urbanism, mass consumerism" (Saler, "Clap" 614). Holmes thereby establishes contact with the "magical reality" (Burger and Neale 8) and "residual irrationality" (During 26) subtending the fascination with magic performance, while also offering therapeutic psychological consolation under the aegis of empiricism and logical deduction. As Fleming-Roberts's pulp detective Diamondstone remarks, detective and magician are "kindred souls" (*Diamondstone* 18), referring not only to their techniques but also to the anxieties mitigated by those techniques.

But Holmes's American pulp successors confronted more directly palpable problems than the reorganization of disciplinary knowledge: harsh economic conditions, spikes in violence brought about by Prohibition, and dubious political developments at home and abroad. The detective magician engages these threats with techniques that barely distinguish him from the criminals he opposes, thereby suggesting more was at stake than the testing of

institutional norms or the mollification of alienated middle class readers. The enchantment of detective fiction in the form of the detective magician, while possibly participating in the magical transformation of reality to effect anxiety-reduction, is not aimed primarily at the reconciliation of readers with Weberian disenchantment. Magic serves as a medium by which ideological contradictions are on display in plain sight.

## II. Situating the Detective Magician

As I suggested in the previous section, scrutiny of the detective magician is relevant to the study of the wider genre in providing insight into the magical nature of detective solutions generally, but its heroes also comprise a transitional figure, situated between detached ratiocination dependent upon analytic distance and open affiliation with criminality in which the opponent's techniques are usurped. Appearing mostly in the American pulps between 1935 and 1945, the subgenre is situated at the confluence of several trends: the waning years of the Golden Age, a highpoint of hard-boiled pulp popularity, and the advent of the procedural and espionage novel. Several series characters define the type, most prominently those of G. T. Fleming-Roberts and Walter Gibson (writing under his Shadow penname Maxwell Grant), who were responsible for four series detectives: Fleming-Roberts's Diamondstone, George Chance (*The Ghost*), and Jeffery Wren, and Gibson's Norgil; all were featured in important pulps like Popular Publications' *Dime Detective* and *Crime Busters* (the short-lived extension of Street and Smith's *Best Detective Magazine*). The conventional set-up involves a successful stage magician, either active or retired, who finds that his skills uniquely qualify him to recognize and expose crime, to explain the techniques used by the criminals, and to employ his magic skills to effect justice (Grant, *Norgil the Magician* xi). Despite these objectives, the investigators occupy a zone between legitimacy and deviancy since their success usually involves methods identical to those of their adversaries, and consequently they are often at loggerheads with official authority. This dubiety is foregrounded in the genre's best-remembered author, Clayton Rawson, whose Great Merlini novels and Don Diavolo novellas (written as Stuart Towne) were penned between 1938 and 1942.<sup>1</sup> Merlini's attempt to maintain amiable relations with his official counterparts does not

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<sup>1</sup> A series of Merlini shorts appeared between 1946 and 1971, mostly in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*.

prevent him from being arrested or jailed; Diavolo's case is direr still: perpetually at odds with the police, he must use his skills both to solve crimes and to exonerate himself. To illustrate a range of problems, we will examine texts by Fleming-Roberts, Grant, and Rawson. Collectively, these authors demonstrate three key ideas: the interchangeability of the detective with other functional roles, including the villain, in a shifting set of identity positions; the detective's willingness to employ criminal techniques; and the self-conscious reduction of criminal investigation to competing forms of (ideological) framing. A final problem, deriving from these three points, will be addressed in Sax Rohmer's episodic novel *Salute to Bazarada* (1939), in which the eponymous hero confronts a recurring figure, the magician villain. Here, we discern a limit, in that the detective's and villain's roles do not merely overlap; disturbingly, the detective's actions, in service to authority, make him potentially more diabolical than his opponent.

The authors just cited represent a portion of a larger field. Other detective magician series characters and one-offs from the same timeframe include Lester Dent's Marvelous Merton in the novella *Hocus-Pocus* (1937), Norvell Page's Aubrei Dunn (1937, *Strange Detective Mysteries*), Paul Ernst's Karlu the Mystic (1938, *Detective Tales*), and some of the Senator Banner stories by Joseph Commings (1947-84, *Ten Detective Aces*). A number of tales from the period, while lacking detective magicians, feature magician villains or victims: Seabury Quinn's Jules de Grandin episode, "The Dead Hand" (1926, *Weird Tales*), Raoul Whitfield's Jo Gar story, "The Magician Murder" (1932, *Black Mask*), and John Butler's Steve Midnight caper, "The Dead Ride Free" (1932, *Dime Detective*). Merle Constiner's The Dean series also deserves mention (1940-45, *Dime Detective*), even though the title character, while versed in magic and the occult, tends to parody these practices in his investigations.<sup>2</sup>

The magical solution, decried by S. S. Van Dine and Ronald Knox in their rule lists and in the Detection Club oath, is typically dismissed as a violation of fair play. Nonetheless, the investigation's denouement, often performed before an appreciative if not overly intelligent audience, frequently comes off as a magical effect. This may take the form of a performance or dramatic reenactment, a technique common to Arthur B. Reeve, Ellery Queen, and

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<sup>2</sup> A smaller group of detectives possess genuine paranormal powers which they rely upon to solve cases. Series include J. U. Giesy and Junius Smith's *Semi Dual* (1912-34, mostly in *Argosy*), Frederick Davis's *Ravenwood* (1936, *Secret Agent "X"*), and Kendall Crossen's *Green Lama* (1940-43, *Double Detective*).

Agatha Christie, and one which is literalized in the theatrical settings of Ngaio Marsh. Given this tendency, the detective magician draws attention to the conflation of the staged and the real, and, going a step farther, subterfuge, in the skirting of legal methods to enforce justice. The opposition of these terms suggests that, at least some of the time, detective narratives obfuscate the grounds upon which truth and guilt are established, and that the amateur detective's alignment with official institutions does not morally justify the dubious elevation of ends over means. The detective magician brings this performance to self-consciousness within a narrow timeframe, raising the question of how this figure is situated at the interstices of the genre's large-scale transformations.

The trappings of early twentieth-century detective fiction—investigative procedures, evidence, the interposition of official authority, the mysterious and complex crime—are absent from early crime vignettes; lacking a police force, society is defended (in fictional accounts) by its so-called innate corporate tendencies, which neutralize the transgressor-outsider (Knight 13); the criminal departure from social norms leads inevitably to the capture of wrongdoers and their self-recognition of guilt.<sup>3</sup> The standard history of the genre—which has come under significant critical scrutiny—generally recognizes Poe's Dupin stories as foundational influences on an emerging Classical period dominated by Doyle and splitting in the Interwar period into the Golden Age and hard-boiled subtypes. The post-World War II era witnesses a move to the collectivized labor of the procedural, denoting another seismic shift during which espionage stories also rise to prominence; institutional and historical political realignments underscore the rationale for this break, given the increasing implausibility of lone amateurs investigating serious crimes.<sup>4</sup>

This barebones trajectory has been analyzed in socioeconomic terms by Ernest Mandel in *Delightful Murder*. Mandel's Trotskyist orientation may not resonate with all readers, but his insights into changing audience attitudes towards criminality are plausibly correlated with major socioeconomic transformations. In Mandel's view, the late medieval contest between authority

<sup>3</sup> Although presented as cautionary parables, the vicarious pleasures offered by the *Newgate Calendar* and early crime-themed broadsides are easy to spot; see Worthington (13-16) and Bell (8-9) for a treatment of this subject.

<sup>4</sup> This “standard” history, reflective of the Haycraft paradigm, has been widely contested, especially in terms of nineteenth-century developments: see, for instance, Maurizio Ascani's *A Counter-History of Crime Fiction*, Pamela Bedore's *Dime Novels and the Roots of American Detective Fiction*, and Clare Clark's *Late Victorian Crime Fiction in the Shadows of Sherlock*.

and the outlaw, exemplified in folk literature from Robin Hood to Eulenspiegel, consists of a general animosity towards the former and (conditional) sympathy for the latter. Official authority is realigned with the forces of good as it shifts from the irrational, traditional order containing vestiges of feudal privilege to the bourgeois legal system (Mandel 8). Eventually, the ideological focus of crime fiction, as we see it reaching more mature forms in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, entails the defense of that order. Mandel professes that the hegemonic dimensions of these stories generally preclude contesting the structures of power they portray; thus in a bourgeois-dominated world, detectives mediate the buttressing of property rights and the defense of individual liberties over wider social commitments. Charles Rzepka explains this tendency by emphasizing the pressure to identify with detectives, understood to be “the defender of hegemonic norms and self-perpetuating cultural value-systems” (22), since they or their surrogates are typically the conduits by which we gain access to the mystery. He goes on to say that the Classical form, for this reason, sets up blocks to the “imaginative identification with the criminal transgressor” (22), who is granted voice only in rare instances. Of course, the reading experience is typically framed more subtly than being lectured by detective authority. Rather, we are exposed to various narrative forms: magical misdirection, the appeal to the aforementioned “hegemonic norms,” or even impotency in the face of strong institutional forces.

Some well-known texts instantiate these ideas. Doyle illustrates the first case in “The Adventure of the Red-Headed League”: Holmes diverts attention from the bank’s capitalist ventures—using its gold reserves to issue profitable loans, which contrasts with the real-life economic deprivations of Holmes’s client—onto the shoulders of John Clay, the bad aristocratic type whom Doyle regularly derides. Clay’s plan to enrich himself directs attention away from the similar but “legitimate” goals of bourgeois bank director Mr. Merryweather, whose vested interests enjoy the support of both detective and police. Christie’s Poirot demonstrates the second orientation. In stories like “The Jewel Robbery at the Grand Metropolitan,” the violation of working class people’s rights (strip searches, illegal collecting of evidence, entrapment) are tolerated since they produce the “right” results. The wealthy Mr. Opalsen may have achieved his position by any number of crimes, but the framing of the scene of action in the hotel suite rather than the colonial oilfields which enriched him, draws attention away from exploitation abroad and onto the victims of class repression at

home.<sup>5</sup> Chandler points up the third case in “Spanish Blood”: the hero Sam Delaguerra endorses a falsified public statement to protect political higher-ups by shunting blame onto a string of corpses with expendable reputations—although the detective has a personal stake in the public version of events, he can hardly do otherwise if he hopes to keep his job. These examples indicate how the (potentially criminal) complicity of the detective must be kept in mind, no matter whether his program is consciously pursued, situated in an ideological blind spot, or institutionally-mediated.

A number of solutions in Classical, Golden Age, and even hard-boiled texts thereby neutralize a pregnant dialectic whose synthetic moment would draw attention to the personally- or institutionally-mediated framing of criminal disruptions. The self-conscious struggle against corrupt institutions, artfully portrayed by Chandler and extended by Ross Macdonald, describes a limit, succinctly expressed by Marlowe’s comment in the closing pages of *The Big Sleep* (1939): “I was part of the nastiness now” (Chandler 764). Marlowe’s self-consciousness demarcates his internal division: to act upon his moral commitments—which would be futile, given the strength of criminal organizations (Eddie Mars and his city hall supporters) and the interests of powerful elites (General Sternwood and his guilty but unpunished daughters)—or to capitulate to a system that, in any event, he cannot change. Marlowe is a boundary figure soon to be superseded by the criminalized detective, whose wider scope of operations (international espionage) dispenses with both sentimentality and the nostalgia for anxiety-reducing solutions to drawing room murders. This transition is nonetheless foreshadowed in the pulps generally, and the detective magician in particular, whose complexities point back to earlier forms of ratiocinative sleight of hand and forward to his fusion with a criminal opponent.

To be sure, the connection between detectives and criminals has been noted in the critical literature. Lee Horsley writes of the “ambiguities inherent in the doubling of the detective and the murderer” and “the classic triangle of victim-murderer-detective” whose functional positions are subject to overlap or exchange (“From” 29). The origins of this ambiguity certainly predate the hard-boiled,<sup>6</sup> as evident in Sean McCann’s contention that Sherlock Holmes is

<sup>5</sup> The Doyle (106-08) and Christie (8-9) examples are analyzed at greater length in Yan.

<sup>6</sup> This doubling already appears in Poe in the Dupin-Minister D connection (Lee 376-77). Ruehlmann finds the roots of this ambivalence earlier still in Cooper’s frontier hero (6).

already implicated in distracting readers from “the evident failure of the unfettered market to deliver a just society”; Doyle’s narratives “registered that threat,” but also “turned it into a manageable tale” (6-7). Later, of course, the gap between liberal principles and socioeconomic realities would escape few, despite, as Horsley points out, the tendency for Golden Age authors to omit reference to the calamities of the twenties and thirties (*Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* 39). In contrast, she characterizes the hard-boiled milieu as awash in crisis: “the stock market crash of 1929; the Great Depression; Prohibition and its attendant gangsterism; the growing evidence of illicit connections between crime, business, and politics in rapidly expanding American cities” (*Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* 69-70)—all of which is standard pulp fare.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, social researchers already entertained strong doubts that a naïve commitment to law and enlightened self-interest could produce a just society. McCann observes a corresponding shift in the context of the development of detective fiction:

To many of the era’s leading intellectuals, the corporate concentration of economic power, the rapid growth of the state, and the prevalence of deep social ills and political conflicts all seemed to make the classical liberal theory at the core of Doyle’s stories outmoded, and the tacit moral center of his fiction—the image of a society of free and responsible individuals—looked ever more like the nostalgic myth that it would plainly be in the “golden age” mystery of the twenties. (16)

This emerging widespread skepticism regarding liberalism ostensibly runs counter to the Classical storyline, in which the detective not only “establishes the right reading of signs” leading to the criminal’s unmasking, but also “restores a sense of wholeness, order, and moral confidence” (McCann 89). By the Depression era, only a magician could bridge this gap. In this context, the invitation to identify with criminality does not reproduce earlier types, such as the honest rogue of folk literature, or the guilty self-recognition of the *Newgate Calendar*; nor are we encouraged to tolerate the occasional foray into criminality to fix leaks in the otherwise robust system of liberal idealism. Rather,

the detective magician's conflicted role epitomizes the dividedness of magic in the modern consciousness.

### **III. The Detective Magician as Criminal**

The literary representation of performed magic falls within the “magic assemblage,” a term coined by During which refers to a “constellation” of practices (e.g., fortune-telling, juggling, ventriloquism, puppet shows, automata, freak-shows) with unmistakably popular origins, and whose defining qualities consist of “sleight of hand and illusion shows” (67). Detective fiction’s marginal position in the assemblage is due in part to the relatively subtle forms of magic practiced during the investigative process, but it is also attributable to the tacit assumption that detectives are upholders of law, order, and justice, whereas, so often, the assemblage’s central figures bear criminal associations.

Early academic studies of magic explicitly link magicians and criminals in their use of deception (Trippett 447; Jastrow, “Belief” 4; see also Lachapelle, *Conjuring* 13; Macknik et al. 871, 877), and for the detective magician, this association complicates the hero’s objectives. Diamondstone complains that “too many people thought ‘magician’ and ‘charlatan’ were synonymous” (Fleming-Roberts, *Diamondstone* 1). Similar obstacles plague the investigations of Rawson’s Merlini and Diavolo, and Grant’s Norgil; Clute and Lewin, in their introduction to an anthology of magic-themed detective stories, ask, “who has more in common with the master magician than the master criminal?” (vi). In line with the means-end distinction made earlier, some real-world magicians suggest that stage performers and criminals are only distinguished by internal motives since “both use the same techniques, and both must make similar preparations” (Randal 16). Cushing Strout, one of the few authors to write on the role of magic in detection, notes the “affinity between classical fictional methods of detection and theatrical methods of deception,” which in each case depends heavily upon misdirection (169). James Cook makes a similar claim, stating that both magician and criminal deal in “respectability and fraud, scientific principles and overt deception, ritualized exposé and aesthetic cover-ups” (200-01)—characteristics which likewise apply to many detectives, whether magicians or not. All three positions are linked by Francesca Coppa, who writes: “the magician is a figure of extreme vulnerability, a criminal trying to protect his secrets from an audience of detectives” (90). The magician,

criminal, and detective coincide in their capacity to create frames of attention to produce an end effect. This practice, literalized in fiction, enables us to define normative boundaries which are in turn negatively reinforced by the lawbreaker.

To be sure, establishing certainty entails framing activities premised upon epistemological norms. The criminal generates an event (corpse, theft, irregularity) whose traces form an investigative center of gravity, a disturbance which becomes legible within a field defined by legal, social, and cultural conventions and standards that give the criminal code or taboo its content. The detective constructs or invokes concrete limits within this generalized field to circumscribe the event, then proceeds to isolate and further determine the scene and the clues, by disclosing signs and indices that are often invisible to the casual reader-observer. Analogously, the performing magician frames a situation, directs or misdirects the audience, and produces a surprising or astonishing effect. Eugene Burger states that magicians “set the parameters of what our experience shall be” (135); the same observation could apply equally to both detectives and criminals.

Another practice involves the detective’s transformation of clues into evidence, a magical process given the clue’s frequently insignificant nature, but also in that such “evidence” may only rarely obtain to real-life juridical standards. The willing suspension of disbelief coincides with the desire to be amazed: when disparate bits of circumstantial evidence are narratively assembled to produce a damning accusation, readers are no less aware of a deception unfolding than are spectators who knowingly allow themselves to believe that bits of paper tossed into the magician’s hat have been magically transformed into a rabbit. The challenge posed by the detective magician vis-à-vis the serious matter of justice is the will to delusion, which though apparently technical in nature, involves a comprehensive worldview. Jastrow, in “The Psychology of Deception,” came to similar conclusions when he found that audience members at magic shows know they are “being deceived by skill and adroitness, and rather [enjoy] it the more [they are] deceived,” believing that they “have nothing at stake” (149).

Jastrow’s insight is relevant to the Diamondstone story “The Buddha Whispers” (1937), an exemplary text that neatly conflates the stability of detective, magician, and criminal roles while also exposing the will to self-deception that characterizes readers and in-text victims alike. Diamondstone’s ostensible opponent is Dal Rama, who runs a mentalist racket opposed by John

Wrenn, a lawyer. Wrenn implores Diamondstone to protect his client Marcus Helm by exposing Dal Rama's fraudulence to Helm's occult-enamored wife. Diamondstone accepts, remarking, "We gentlemen of the abracadabra hate none of our fellow men save charlatans who employ trickery for the purpose of defrauding the innocent into believing that Aunt Nettie, speaking from the Great Beyond, can tell exactly what ought to be done with a Postal Savings account" (Fleming-Roberts, *Diamondstone* 75). He attends Dal Rama's show and quickly spots the ruses by which Dal Rama manages his effects. But Diamondstone is hampered by the credulous crowd—Mrs. Helm is indignant when the detective dismisses the session as mummary. Dal Rama, however, understands the threat posed by Diamondstone's exposure and demands that he clear out—at gunpoint. Helm, having announced his plan to change his will to prevent his wife from giving money to occult groups, is killed that same night, and the body is discovered by Wrenn and Helm's daughter. The new will supplies motives to several people: Dal Rama, the wife, and Helm's son and daughter—even Diamondstone is suspected. After a closer look at the titular Buddha, Diamondstone discovers the body of Helm's missing son concealed inside. The suspects converge on the scene, and the detective reveals that although Dal Rama intended murder and went so far as to drug Helm, it was actually Wrenn who killed both men to conceal his mismanagement of estate funds.

Roles that seem functionally distinct overlap in this story. Placing Diamondstone, Dal Rama, and Wrenn at the vertices of a triangle, Diamondstone and Dal Rama are linked in that both are skilled in mentalist and sleight-of-hand techniques. Diamondstone is connected to Wrenn by their investigation and prosecution of crime; the former as a detective, the latter as a lawyer and the ostensibly responsible caretaker of his client's wealth. Dal Rama and Wrenn, both criminals, are also magicians who employ tricks to cover their fraudulence. In Wrenn's case, this means the use of misdirection to purposively draw the detective's attention to aspects of the victims' behavior which suggest motive or provide an alibi, thereby deflecting attention from himself and towards Dal Rama. Diamondstone, however, also behaves criminally: he illegally enters Dal Rama's house, destroys and tampers with material evidence, assaults a police officer, and resists arrest. The magical climax, the production of the second corpse, constitutes the dramatic materialization of evidence which literally and figuratively disables the criminal: the body falls out of a

compartment onto Wrenn, who, having been unmasked by Diamondstone, has trained his gun on the other characters.

The difference between the three characters is less evident in their behavior than in their ability to establish meaningful boundaries around events. Wrenn attempts to frame Dal Rama as a murderer, but he also contrives to delimit Diamondstone's focus of attention. Eventually, Diamondstone furnishes a narrative that explains everyone's actions within a defined zone of operations, including motives and psychological propensities. His "magical" production of the second corpse (and the poetic justice of its use to disable the killer, reminiscent of Poe's "Thou Art the Man") compels belief, but Diamondstone is acutely aware that it is only a competing magical display. Earlier in the text, he muses that it was "clear that the entire population of the city was sold on Dal Rama, his medium, . . . and the bronze Buddha itself" (Fleming-Roberts, *Diamondstone* 77). Reason temporarily triumphs despite the delusions of an easily duped crowd who likely believe they "have nothing at stake," all evidence to the contrary.

A number of other stories illustrate this functional overlap without raising any strikingly new features. Rawson's Don Diavolo mysteries in particular highlight the fluid identity of the hero. Outwardly, the magician's ambiguous status stems from his entanglement in bizarre crimes involving seemingly impossible events; for the hard-headed police investigators, the inadmissibility of otherworldly explanations suggests a magician. Consequently, Diavolo takes on multiple roles: performer, detective, and (suspected) criminal. Ironically, his criminal opponents are sometimes faulted for not being sufficiently talented magicians, such as in "Death Out of Thin Air" (1941), when Diavolo remarks that the culprit "was a good conjurer and he came within inches of being a first-class criminal" (Towne 143).

Rawson's Merlini novels also involve supernatural or spiritualist themes, though the contest is more self-consciously defined by the presence of tough-minded scientists who function to disparage the superstitious tendencies of the credulous. Such gullibility is sometimes represented by the naïve spiritualist who is convinced of his own powers, but turns out to be a tool of some criminal enterprise. Dr. Gail, a psychologist in Rawson's *The Footprints on the Ceiling* (1939), labels this condition "visual hallucination," in which "the crystal gazer who thinks the vision is an external reality is only a magician playing tricks on himself" (85). Gail's diagnosis characterizes the self-deluded Dr. Seer from

Fleming-Roberts's "The Ghost Strikes Back" (1940), whose naivety is exploited by the true criminals (a ploy also found in Lester Dent's *Hocus Pocus*). At times, detective magicians make a display of mentalist tricks: Norgil enlists them to promote his act (Grant, *Norgil: More Tales* 3), as does Don Diavolo (Towne, "Death" 59), but the occult, almost universally reviled in detective fiction, typically serves as a methodological foil to the detective's analytic rigor.<sup>7</sup> The overlap pertains most concretely to claims of paranormal powers, since the spiritualist attempts to capitalize on the residual supernaturalism associated with or sometimes cultivated by the magician.<sup>8</sup> Paralleling the avowal of otherworldly power is the suspicion that magicians are collectively deceivers out for personal gain at the expense of their audiences. This assumption is not without foundation, since, as Lachapelle notes, "if conjurers were good at debunking mediums and mystic performers, it was because they had often, at least indirectly, taught these performers some of their tricks" (*Conjuring* 61).

The mentalist bag of tricks reflects the psychological side of stage techniques shared by detective magicians and criminals who are intent on theft and violence. Paradoxically, these social disruptions are put right by figures who themselves engage in taboo or criminal acts: violence or murder (directed particularly against women and animals), suicide (bullet catches, burial alive, lengthy submergence in water), fraud, counterfeiting, theft (vanishes which magicians term "steals," safe-breaking), destruction of property, and escapes (lock-picking, jailbreak, handcuffs). We participate vicariously in the misdeeds of the hero who, in these instances, is situated on the same plane of behavior as the criminal. Although these tendencies remain subdued in the Classical and Golden Age subgenres, for the detective magician they are essential to solving the mystery. Magical skill and technical competence, substitutes for esoteric knowledge, not only move the plot; tricks, gimmicks, sleight of hand, or misdirection enable the detective's escape, survival, or enlightenment.

A few examples demonstrate the range of applications. Fleming-Roberts's Ghost, George Chance, an adept at lock-picking, thinks to himself: "A fortunate

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<sup>7</sup> An exception to this rule is the occult detective—the Askews' Alymer Vance, Algernon Blackwood's John Silence, Dion Fortune's Dr. Taverne, William Hodgson's Carnacki, or Margery Lawrence's Miles Pennoyer, to name a few.

<sup>8</sup> A supernatural aura was projected by some magicians, especially in promotional posters (Steinmeyer, *Hiding*; J. Cook 207; Grant, *Norgil the Magician* ix). See also Holden's *Programmes*, especially illustrations for Dante and Oswald Williams, and Randi's *Conjuring* for Servais Le Roy, Kellar, Howard Thurston, Dante, Charles Carter, and Kassner.

thing the Ghost had chosen to enlist his arts on the side of the law. He would have made a first class burglar" (*Ghost* 217). In Rawson's *The Headless Lady* (1941) the criminal's misdeeds are outdone by Merlini, who does not shrink from theft, illegal entry, suppression or destruction of evidence, and jailbreak—crimes made possible by his knowledge of magic. Moreover, Merlini's familiarity with the argot and code symbols of circus workers, thieves, hobos, and the underworld allows him to move freely in this class. Many of the Diamondstone and Jeffery Wren stories show the detective's magic used in ways identical to the crooks they battle. For instance, in "The Brothers of Doom" (1937), Diamondstone capitalizes on his card skills (palming, crooked dealing, subtle card marking) to infiltrate a gambling organization, attracting sufficient attention to be offered a position in the cartel.

The most impressive display of techniques linking detective magician and crooks is found in Grant's Norgil (Don Diavolo running a close second); criminal expertise is displayed in stories like "Norgil-Magician" (1937), "Ring of Death" (1938), and "Murderer's Throne" (1938). Magic and performance are normally tied directly to the cases Norgil investigates: in the first series tale he steals from committee members' pockets on stage to produce the evidence necessary to arrest one of them. The connections are often subtler, as in "Ring of Death." The story opens with a trick: a ring is borrowed from an audience member (which turns out to be swag from a jewel robbery) and forcibly hammered into a gun from which it is fired, only to reappear suspended over the audience intact. The trick entails misdirection and substitution, but the jewel theft that later comes to light was likewise facilitated by diverting the victim's attention and substituting fake gems. In "Murderer's Throne" we witness a more disturbing connection. Norgil uses his magic show to accuse a mob boss—a member of his audience—of a crime. His attempt to amass evidence backfires when a victim's corpse and stolen money from a bank heist are concealed in Norgil's props, implicating him in both robbery and murder and forcing him to evade the police in ways that resemble his absconding foes. Norgil is later confronted by the criminals, who hope to silence a witness by electrocuting Norgil's female assistant in a gimmicked (though functional) electric chair that Norgil had built for stage purposes. The criminals are motivated to kill by their evil natures, but had Norgil produced the effect, he would have followed a similar procedure with the same assistant—his own

violence against women, though feigned, formally duplicates that of the criminals.

The merging of the hero's and villain's behaviors, both in terms of mentalist and stage techniques, is generalizable as calculated misdirection, but socially it resolves itself into a question of power which is often linked to the paranormal, and thus to explanations that escape the confines of reason alone.<sup>9</sup> The interpenetration of roles is illustrated in Rawson's first Merlini novel, *Death from a Top Hat* (1938). Merlini himself perceives "the similarity that exists between crime and conjuring, between the murderer and the magician" whose "basic principles of deception . . . are identical" (202), and he lectures his friend, Inspector Gavigan, on the phenomenon of "faulty observation" in which misdirection "is the first fundamental principle of deception." This, along with "Imitation and Concealment," he concludes, are techniques "used by magicians, criminals, and detective story authors alike" (183). He supplements this view in *The Footprints on the Ceiling*, asserting "The Principles of Deception" are shared between "murderer, magician, or mystery-story writer" (252; see also Towne, "Claws" 69-70). *Death from a Top Hat* gives sustained attention to this theme by pitting Merlini against a suspect pool of spiritualists and magicians. Merlini and magician David Duvallo, the detective and the criminal, respectively, are essentially doubles, mirroring each other in regard to knowledge and skill. Merlini is the more complex figure, though, in his relation to the police and press, institutional roles represented by the methodical but unimaginative cop (Gavigan) and sidekick-narrator (Ross Harte). As a journalist, Harte fulfills the function of the skeptical non-magician audience member whose wonderment is genuine but who nonetheless demands an explanatory disquisition to bring the case down to earth. No less importantly, Harte's profession is the medium through which the investigation comes before the public. The solution is legitimated by the aura of truthfulness generated by the press, which points up another dimension of institutional framing.

Harte enters the case when he hears a commotion in the hall of his apartment building—three people seek admission to a neighbor's apartment, that of Cesare Sabbat, with whom they claim an appointment. Receiving no reply, they force an entry, only to find Sabbat strangled and his body arranged within a pentangle. Occultist paraphernalia litter the room, but the real mystery

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Cook develops the contest between the rational and paranormal in the context of the locked room mystery in an insightful chapter on Carr; see especially 109-10 and 119-23.

is how the crime was committed, given the locked and bolted doors and blocked-up keyholes. The three visitors, Colonel Watrous, Madame Rappourt, and Eugene Tarot, represent distinct types: the colonel is an enthusiastic “psychical scientist” intent on confirming his beliefs, Rappourt is a spirit medium, and Tarot is a well-known stage performer. Sabbat, described by the colonel as “a widely recognized authority on cabalistic theory, but also a practical student of many of the occult sciences” (Rawson, *Death* 11), figures as a fourth character type, in that he possesses the colonel’s keenness without his skepticism. As with many detective fiction everyman narrators, Harte conveys the eerie and foreboding atmosphere suggested by the satanic appurtenances crowding Sabbat’s rooms, underscoring his psychological susceptibility to the grotesque and impossible. He does not immediately sense that the nature of the crime points to a perpetrator who possesses knowledge of magic. For this reason, Merlini is called in as a trustworthy outside authority. Importantly, he reiterates the guiding principle for the resolution of magic-saturated crime, claiming that “deception is eighty percent psychology and is mostly accomplished by hindering the audience’s observation in some manner, so that it is either incomplete or incorrect.” He continues: “The end result is actually a normal one, but, thus distorted, has the *appearance* of impossibility, of magic, sorcery, legerdemain, hocus-pocus, conjuring” (79-80)—in short, the devious work of the villain, who in this case is also a magician.

The prime suspect is David Duvallo, the Escape King. Material evidence links him to the crime, and in a police interview his professional skills are sounded, as Gavigan pressures him to theorize how the locked room stunt was managed. Shortly thereafter, Tarot is found strangled in Duvallo’s house (a second locked-room problem) with clues that tie it to the first crime. A motive starts to take shape after \$50,000 deposits are found in both Sabbat’s and Tarot’s bank accounts, suggesting a blackmail angle. After Duvallo’s flight and capture, the crime is explained jointly by Merlini and Gavigan to Harte, who then offers an account to the public. Framing moves fluidly between detective, official investigator, journalist, and the criminal, who ironically had been asked to explain his own crime during the investigative process before he was formally charged with it. Detectives, magicians, and criminals double each other, borrow each other’s techniques. We have, merged into one, a figure who gives vent to anti-social impulses while still operating under the aegis of institutional legitimacy. But whereas Duvallo was motivated by an inward-

oriented impulse of self-preservation, another type of magician villain is spurred by power—this is the subject of our last textual example.

Although *Salute to Bazarada* is termed a novel, it is structured like many of the Craig Kennedy compilations in which one stand-alone episode segues with the next. Overall, like his fictional contemporaries, Bazarada constantly resorts to criminal techniques: illegal entry, misdirection to commit theft and extortion, and impersonations to abet unlawful acts—all, of course, in the service of justice. In the fourth and darkest segment Bazarada confronts a practitioner of black magic. As a magician villain, he differs from the Dal Rama-Don Duvallo type in that he pursues the active harm of others and corruption of institutions instead of being motivated purely by self-interest. Wealthy and socially prominent, Dr. Emmanuel Sarafan (i.e. Servius Jerome) leads a double life. Publicly, Sarafan is a respected professional, whereas Jerome is described as a man possessing “deep knowledge allied to the instincts of Satan,” who “in return for substantial sums initiated his victims into strange rites” (Rohmer 103). Bazarada is called in to rescue the daughter of an American millionaire, Mary Coppinger, who has accompanied Jerome to his house on Madeira against her father’s wishes. Due to Sarafan’s status on the island, the local authorities are hostile to Bazarada, and eventually, through Jerome’s machinations, Bazarada is framed and imprisoned for murder. Quite literally, then, the contest concerns the power to enframe, and therefore is linked to the subversion of justice and the complicity of institutions in its miscarriage. Bazarada, aware of this, aptly terms Jerome “a figure of power” (104). When the two men confront each other, Jerome denigrates Bazarada in a telling way:

You are a conjurer—a vaudeville artist—you work with traps and mirrors and other mechanical devices: you call yourself a magician! What do you know of magic? . . . Magic is the power to control others, Bazarada! As Dr. Sarafan I have been known and respected in Madeira for many years. You have tried to tell the authorities that Dr. Sarafan is Servius Jerome. They laugh. Why? Because I have asserted my control. My magic above yours. (105)

The magician opponent has come to believe in his own power, but unlike his more credulous brethren, he has grounds to do so: this otherwise unattractive

figure has not only bent local authority to his will but has convinced the young Mary to abandon her father and to live with him at his manor prior to their marriage. Ironically, it is only through duplicating Jerome's crime of abducting Mary that Bazarada is able to remove her forcibly from his control (neatly substituting the villain in the prison cell where he had been confined)—but the scream in the night heard by the servants, presumably indicating Bazarada's appearance in Mary's bedroom, suggests that, unlike Jerome, Bazarada takes her against her will. The vicarious spectacle, ostensibly performed for the victim's own good, stands at a limit, given her earlier remarks to Bazarada dismissing his request that she flee with him: "I belong to another life—a higher life. Father doesn't understand. Tell him that I am happy" (Rohmer 112).

#### IV. Conclusion

Detective stories which are irreducible to merely abstract puzzles typically incorporate *some* form of magic into their meaning structure. These narratives resemble what the historian of magic Henry Ridgely Evans termed "magic presented in dramatic form" (9), a category best illustrated today by Bizarre Magic. The exponents of Bizarre Magic, like their dramatically oriented predecessors,<sup>10</sup> employ magical effects to punctuate performed narratives in which magical paraphernalia "function as symbols and metaphors: they point beyond themselves to a larger reality and a greater mystery" (Burger 8-9). Throughout its history, the detective story makes meaningful use of this structure in its capacity to frame the reader's focus, what Steinmeyer terms "the construction of a reality which supports the illusion" (*Art* 8). The illusion is not confined to the startling effect—Holmes displaying a pearl embedded in a plaster bust, Poirot unmasking the collective guilt of the passengers on a train, or Marlowe being "shot" multiple times by his client's daughter—it is a gesture towards a world that generates the effect's condition of possibility. But these conditions are themselves only perceptible through the posing of questions that usually remain unasked. Merlini moves to the heart of this matter by claiming that "an audience, watching magic, gets impossible answers because the magician so arranges things that the spectators ask themselves the wrong

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<sup>10</sup> See chapter 2 from Maskelyne and Devant's *Our Magic* (5-28) for a theory of how effects should be integrated into narrative. Dan North explores a similar train of thought in early filmmaker-magicians like Georges Méliès (73-74).

questions” (Rawson, *Great Merlini* 108), which is in fact what readers of detective stories are almost certain to do—not least in respect to the ideological content subtending outcomes.

The detective magician draws our attention to the requirements necessary for sustaining the illusion of a detached observer encountering an objectively-established or “natural” field of inquiry, but only as a boundary figure pointing towards something new, namely as a wielder of extra-institutional, magical power. Functionally, this position appears instrumental to assessing and explaining the events contained at the scene—but such detachment is problematic. The magician, likewise, manages the illusion, but his role lacks the presumed neutrality of the detective, in that he actively establishes the boundaries within which the trick evolves. Such empowerment can lead to abuses when the detective consciously takes on the magician’s role; his ability to define a zone of focus is combined with misdirection to enable forms of control, usually supportive of specific interests. Equally problematic is the pleasure derived from his actions, which presumably are motivated by real psychological needs and anxieties. These desires are not confined to the detective magician subgenre; the structure which the subgenre clarifies is present elsewhere and leads to contradictions—for instance, Holmes’s condemnation and sanctioning of the same crimes in “The Adventure of the Devil’s Foot,” Martin Hewitt’s rationalization of fraud in “The Stanway Cameo Mystery,” or Lord Peter’s condoning of murder in “The Unsolved Puzzle of the Man with No Face.” Hard-boiled examples stand apart in the more radical blurring of distinctions between detective and criminal: such detectives demonstrate callous indifference towards individuals, like Jonathan Latimer’s Bill Crane; or towards society generally, as is strikingly displayed in the Op’s active promotion of mayhem in *Red Harvest*; or they acknowledge, like Ted Malvern does at the end of Chandler’s short story “Guns at Cyrano’s,” that they cannot extricate themselves from a pervasive, society-wide corruption.

What seems indisputable, however, is that the criminal’s role undergoes significant change, returning us to Mandel’s chronology, and to the substantiation of his schema. In early crime narratives, characters challenging the social interests of the dominant group represent figures of just resistance, but in the period stretching from the mid-nineteenth century through the Golden Age texts of the Interwar period, this character type is in most cases partitioned off and condemned. The character, first as protagonist, then as antagonist,

undergoes a dialectical transformation resulting in the criminally-implicated detective. My focus texts, situated mostly between 1937 to 1944, grant prominence to these mixed characters.<sup>11</sup> The type, encompassing detective, magician, and criminal, raises tensions in that, first, the detective and magician conflate deception, mystification, and residual supernatural associations with a rational, methodical will to truth. The detective and criminal, linked by the magician, are likewise merged, rendering the detective's actions technically indistinguishable from his criminal opponent. To be sure, Holmes's burglary in "The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton" or Poirot's in "The Veiled Lady" are memorable, slightly perverse departures from the norm (or more radically, the murder committed by Mrs. Bradley in *Speedy Death*), but they are just that—indisputably and self-consciously abnormal, unlike the magician detectives' regularized reliance upon criminal techniques to achieve their ends. Norms point to categories, never absolute or entirely stable, that ground the establishment of right, truth, legitimacy, methodological soundness, victimization, motive, and most of the other abstractions relevant to the genre's conventional features—but for the detective magician, still empowered to define the scope of the event (as opposed, for example, to the pessimistic submission of the post *Galton Case* Lew Archer), they appear inherently confused. Given the historical pressures confronting American audiences of the 1930s, the detective magician is not primarily the reconciliation of readers with Weberian disenchantment, as Saler argues Sherlock Holmes to be. Nearly a half-century later, magic serves as a medium by which ideological contradictions are on display in plain sight, a subgeneric way station whose next stop is the overt and even celebrated criminality of Mickey Spillane, Ian Fleming, and Jim Thompson.

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<sup>11</sup> This tension may well be cyclical given the "American heroic dilemma" (6) that Ruehlmann perceives in the 1970s, citing William Calley's role in the My Lai Massacre and the Lavelle Affair, among other examples. Could the events referenced by Ruehlmann explain the renewed interest in the detective magician in the 1970s, a decade which witnessed the republication of Grant, Rawson, Rohmer, and the Clute-Lewin anthology?

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