

# Salome Otterbourne, Ethical Identity, and the Film Adaptions of Agatha Christie's *Death on the Nile* (1978, 2004, and 2022)

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**Abstract:** This article examines three film adaptations of Agatha Christie's *Death on the Nile* (1937), produced in 1978, 2004, and 2022, and will focus especially on the character of Salome Otterbourne. It will study how the character was being reimagined for each adaptation and how her ethical identity is constructed. The article will make sense of the different filmic recastings of Mrs Otterbourne as part of a process of moral revaluation, which entails her transformation from a minor character addicted to alcohol and rejected by Poirot as ethically aberrant. In the process, she is changed and ethically reinscribed, in the most recent film, from a writer of romance fiction into an empowered black blues singer, endowed with the ability to awaken feelings in the sleuth he had thought long dead.

**Keywords:** Agatha Christie; *Death on the Nile*; novel-film adaptations (1978, 2004, 2022); ethical criticism

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**标题：**萨洛米·奥特本、伦理身份与阿加莎·克里斯蒂《尼罗河上的惨案》的电影改编（1978年、2004年和2022年）

**内容摘要：**本文探讨了阿加莎·克里斯蒂于1937年创作的小说《尼罗河上的惨案》在三次电影改编中的呈现，分别是1978年、2004年和2022年版本，并着重关注萨洛米·奥特本这一角色，考察每个改编版本对这一人物形象的重新塑造及该人物的伦理身份建构。作为道德再评价的一部分，本文探讨了不同电影对萨洛米·奥特本的重新塑造，包括从最初作为一个沉迷于酒精、被普瓦罗拒绝并被视为道德异常的次要角色。在最新的电影中，她从一位浪漫小说作家转变为一位被赋权的黑人蓝调歌手。这一转变使其获得他曾认为早已消失的能力，即唤醒侦探内心深处的情感的能力。

**关键词：**阿加莎·克里斯蒂；《尼罗河上的惨案》；小说电影改编（1978、

2004、2022）；伦理批评

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It is the aim of this article to study how Agatha Christie's detective novel, featuring the Belgian sleuth, Hercule Poirot, *Death on the Nile* (1937), was adapted for the screen. Three film versions of Christie's work were produced respectively in 1978, 2004, and 2022, and each of these rewrites and reimagines individual characters and character constellations. Several characters undergo transformations in the ways in which they are rendered for the screen. I shall, however, focus on only a single character, the author of erotic fiction, Salome Otterbourne, and the ways in which her character was reinvented and given new meanings by screen-writers, film directors, and actresses. I shall argue that, in contrast to Christie's original presentation and conceptualization, the spectacular potential of the character to serve an ethical purpose is recognized by all directors. For, in the process of updating Mrs Otterbourne, adaptors portrayed her as possessing an increasingly important function in how Poirot engages with desire, including—in the most recent production—his own.

Surprisingly few examinations of the screen adaptations of Christie's novel have been undertaken, Mark Aldridge's 2016 *Agatha Christie on Screen* offering the most comprehensive account, even though he focuses on only the 1978 film. He understands the production as "one of the most fondly remembered and well-played Christie stories on screen" (Aldridge, *Agatha Christie on Screen* 143), but he has very little to say about the character of Mrs Otterbourne. Likewise, the two earlier book-length studies of filmic versions of Christie's fiction, which both include discussions of *Death on the Nile*, do not acknowledge the character's significance, Peter Haining in *Agatha Christie: Murder in Four Acts* (1991) terming her "the awful Salome Otterbourne" (Haining 110), without explaining this characterization. By contrast, Scott Palmer, in *The Films of Agatha Christie* (1993), does not discuss the character at all. Strikingly, Merja Makinen, in *Agatha Christie Investigating Femininity* (2006), does not discuss the character, either, despite both her overall contention that Christie's "representation of femininity contested traditional expectations" (Makinen 1) and her declared aim of analyzing the different instances of femininity, including "the concept of women behaving badly" (Makinen 115). Makinen's category is primarily concerned with female villains, rather than the socially disruptive Mrs Otterbourne. She discusses "Christie's female characters

[in the process of] challenging patriarchal prescriptions, both fictional and cultural" (Makinen 65), and she seeks to explain why "Christie allows women the powerful centrality of disruptive agency" (Makinen 118). Even given the constraints of her book's coverage, the omission of Salome Otterbourne from her examination is remarkable, especially since the character "ends up playing a pivotal role in the whole mystery" (Aldridge, *Agatha Christie on Screen* 142).

More than that, the three incarnations of the character that occur in the filmic adaptations represent attempts at offering different ways in which to solve the ethical dilemma that Christie associated with Mrs Otterbourne in 1937. This dilemma especially concerned the character's "ethical relations" within an "ethical environment" (Nie 190) that was originally grounded in the 1930s but that subsequently changes in each of the adaptations. It also involved the author's own (moral) rejection—through her mouthpiece, Poirot—of a character whom she considered transgressive and unethical in her dealings with her daughter and those to whom she communicates her erotic self-construction. Such was the centrality of the complicated characterization of (and Poirot's surprisingly explicit aversion to) Salome Otterbourne within the storyworld devised by Christie that the three adaptations utilized distinct strategies to define as well as redefine her moral being as witnessed and experienced by others. Examining how the different film adaptations made sense of the character by performing her ethical nature variously, the article will undertake a reading that will unravel both the "ethical values" that help to reimagine Christie's character for the screen. It will, furthermore, study how, in the process of adaptation, Mrs Otterbourne is given increasingly positive meanings as she overcomes what Nie Zhenzhao has termed "ethical chaos," "instincts and primitive desires" (Nie 89).

In *Death on the Nile* Christie introduces Mrs Otterbourne as a minor character. She is an irritant to Poirot; yet, on the point of revealing the murderer's identity, she is shot because, at least for that single time, she is taken seriously by the detective and the murderer. In the context of her dramatic realization by different actresses, Mrs Otterbourne is memorable for a number of reasons, and the pseudo-erotic tragi-comical conception of the figure—especially as it operates within the "ethical order" of the adaptations—deserves further consideration. Christie's choice of the name of Salome was likely related to the erotic associations the biblical figure, King Herod's step-daughter, possessed and which served Oscar Wilde for his own tragic reimagining of the figure in *Salome* (1891/1894). Wilde's Salome falls in love with the imprisoned John the Baptist (Jokanaan), but is rejected by him, whereupon—at her request and as recorded in Mark 6:21-29—Herod has the prisoner beheaded, the

severed head being presented to her on a platter. Now Salome, who is commonly termed the “unrighteous,” is able to kiss the dead John’s lips, but at Herod’s order is herself executed. Wilde’s casting of the figure rendered her as an individual driven by desire, unethical in her rejected licentious longing for physical union and—in line with the ethical code of the time—suitably punished.

Salome, then, was understood as a deviant, as an unethical, egotistically motivated woman possessed of love for John but as seeking his destruction once he does not reciprocate her passion. Christie capitalized on these cultural associations related to Salome but revalued the figure by repeatedly presenting the character ironically—as being unable to enthrall men and make them love her, despite what is frequently vocalized towards Poirot as burning desire (York 136). The novelist’s characterization of Salome Otterbourne through the narrative voice of Poirot is not sympathetic, which largely reflects a period prejudice (based on Christie’s own Victorian ethical thinking) against the kind of woman Mrs Otterbourne represents. The degree to which the detective articulates his dislike of and objection to her is unusual. For rarely is he so disparaging and personal in his judgments of others. But, given his strong religious (Catholic) faith, his attitude may indirectly and subconsciously be related to the palimpsestic inscription of Mrs Otterbourne with the biblical Salome’s criminality: Poirot considers her a “poisonous woman” (Christie 223) and an “odious woman” (Christie 301), denominating her as “the appalling mother in the turban” (Christie 97). It is not clear whether the father of her daughter is alive, dead, or has divorced her; or whether she has had a part in his being absent. She is also compared by the detective to a predatory “tiger” (Christie 293), rapacious and uncontrollable like Wilde’s Salome but not shown to be such a predator in action by Christie. Rather than justifying his negative characterization of Mrs Otterbourne on the basis of her unlicensed desire, the reason for his rejection of her is not clearly stated. For it is through extra-textual inference—her fiction<sup>1</sup> only referenced by evocative titles such as *Under the Fig Tree* and *Barren Vine*—and an intertextual recall of Wilde’s Salome, which may have been recalled by readers of *Death on the Nile*, that her unethical nature is constructed.

Mrs Otterbourne is cast as an excessive woman of the orient, wearing striking apparel, including a turban, “floating batik material” (Christie 222), and “a scarlet satin dressing gown” (Christie 127). Her appearance and association with the orient define her as a woman of passion, a suitable characterization for a novelist who specializes in writing erotic fiction. Rather than reflecting and being the expression of lived experience, her orientalism is constructed. It is conceived to highlight her

1 Glossed as “‘trashy romance’ of the lowbrow” by one critic (Mills 64).

exceptionality—the choice in oriental clothing and self-performance indications of her unethical nature. For she is playing the part of an orientalized western woman at a time when such apparel was considered daring and ambiguous, that is dangerous in terms of the construction of acceptable femininity. In this respect, holding that “Christie drew her western characters favourably despite their defects, frauds and falsities” and that she “tak[es...] westerners’ sides” (Zengin 164, 179), Mevlüde Zengin fundamentally misreads Mrs Otterbourne’s character and Christie’s attitude towards her. For Christie is not sympathetic towards Mrs Otterbourne and, for that reason, associates the character with the orientalism trope. Intent on identifying (and reinforcing) a polarity between east and west, Zengin does not grasp that the alcoholic writer is an instance of the oriental other who fashions herself deliberately as such and gains discursive power in the process. In fact, Mrs Otterbourne fashions her appearance in line with the fictional realm of romance and of the fulfilment of her desire she creates in her novels. But she remains outside of this realm, extradiagetically, despite her verbal assertion of the reality of her books being her lived experience rather than a prosthetic fantasy she cannot make real and liveable. As such, her power as a domineering presence and a would-be erotic attraction is undermined by her erratic behaviour and the comic (and, at times, grotesque) inflection of her character. To Christie, she is an instance of ethical chaos.

Poirot, as well as the other passengers on the steamboat, the *Karnak*, witnesses instances of her drunken behaviour and the dramatization of her own deluded sense that she is attractive and socially powerful. That she possesses ethical understanding, however, is illustrated by her being conscious of the stigma attached to alcoholism, especially since both she and her daughter seek to keep her dependency on alcohol a secret. Even though not stated in these terms, drink to her constitutes a crime: she cannot abstain from it but unsuccessfully tries to conceal her addiction, which, in the 1930s, is not cast as an illness but a (moral) disease. In her insistence that she abhors alcohol, she protests too much, usually to comic effect—a punishment of sorts to demonstrate her character flaws: “I am practically a teetotaller. You may have noticed I never drink anything but water—or perhaps lemonade. I cannot bear the taste of spirits” (Christie 57). For at night, staff on the boat supply her with the alcohol she does not consume in public. In fact, and unlike Wilde’s ethically unredeemable Salome, the public image she aims to convey of herself as a woman confident in her own difference is only a façade inadequately concealing the exact opposite. As such, it highlights her inadequacy. Even while seeking to establish her prominence as a celebrity at the beginning of the narrative, she puts into relief wishful thinking as opposed to an accurate statement regarding

her declining reputation. Statements like— “Quite a lot of notables here now, aren’t there? I expect we shall see a paragraph about it in the papers soon. Society beauties, famous novelists—” (Christie 55)—are meant to be read inclusively as being about her as part of a group of celebrities assembled on the Karnak. Yet her ethical relations with the community of celebrities she invokes are tenuous. That she considers herself a famous novelist is undoubted, although her daughter, Rosalie, later apologetically reveals that her fame is a thing of the past and that this loss of fame and her audience were responsible for her turning to drink.

It isn’t really her fault. She got discouraged. Her books didn’t sell any more. People are tired of all of that cheap sex stuff [...] it hurt her—it hurt her dreadfully. And so she began to—to drink. For a long time I didn’t know why she was so queer. Then, when I found out, I tried to—to stop it. [...] And then—she began to dislike me for it. She—she’s turned right against me. I think she almost hates me sometimes. (Christie 246)

It is not until Rosalie’s revelation of her mother’s alcoholism and the reason provided for it that the reader is given a more sympathetic view of Rosalie and Mrs Otterbourne as troubled and suffering individuals, the former through her mother’s resentment of her protectiveness, the latter through the recognition that her writing is no longer in demand. But this insight does not change Poirot’s ethical judgment of Mrs Otterbourne.

Rosalie’s mother is, however, transformed from a grotesque to a tragic figure, once she witnesses Jacqueline de Bellefort enter the cabin of Linnet Doyle’s maid, Louise Bourget, who is killed shortly afterwards. While Poirot is with Simon Doyle who, as yet unknown to the detective, has shot his wife, Mrs Otterbourne “entered like a tornado. Her face was suffused with colour, her gait slightly unsteady, her command of words not quite under her control” (292). She is about to reveal that Jacqueline de Bellefort has likely murdered Louise but is shot before she can identify the murderer. In death, Salome Otterbourne is no longer ridiculous and melodramatic. Her suffering has ended but her daughter is sorely grieved at her loss. Importantly, Christie’s general attitude towards Salome Otterbourne does not change at this point. The latter is still a character whose disposition and behaviour are presented as aberrant; as a mother, she has failed her daughter, and the nature of her writing and the painful sense of her erotic unfulfillment have indirectly been responsible for her bitterness and dysfunction. As such, because of her proleptic and melodramatic revelation that she knows the murderer’s identity, she has, indirectly,

brought about her own death. Not responsible, like the biblical Salome, for another's demise, her excess is punished by the moral-societal verdict Poirot had articulated against her as "odious" and other—an ethical assessment that is transvalued to various degrees in the film adaptations.

While Christie's characterization of Salome Otterbourne was essentially negative, Anthony Shaffer's screenplay for the 1978 film version for EMI Films, directed by John Guillermin, introduces a more positive image of her. For the novelist was presented as a flamboyant and comical individual, in a similar vein to the presentation of the witty Hercule Poirot, played by Peter Ustinov. Unlike the original, "Broadway and film legend" Angela Lansbury's rendering of Mrs Otterbourne "increase[d] the camp value" (Aldridge 141) of the film. Aldridge highlights "Lansbury's scene-stealing turn" (Aldridge 143), her dramatic exuberance not countered by a faithful portrayal by Poirot's personality as fashioned by Christie but supported through Peter Ustinov's, at times, equally comical rendering of the detective. In contrast to Christie's text, Lansbury's portrayal of the novelist did not involve her refraining from drinking publicly at the ship's bar and in the saloon. In this overt change of the character's consumption of drink, the adaptation reflects a changing ethical code in the decade the film was produced. For the new ethical environment included not only the increasing social empowerment of women but also their reformulation of conservative pre-World War II ethical codes. In the process, what had largely been understood as an ethical crime in the 1930s was considered less objectionable four decades later. As a result of changing values, the 1978 adaptation highlights Mrs Otterbourne's eccentricity as a particular (and positive) feature of interest with which Christie's character had not been endowed: most of these drinking scenes, including where Lansbury addresses Poirot as "Mr Porridge" and where she consumes an alcoholic drink called Golden Sekip, based on a beverage in the fictional ancient Egyptian city of Crocodopolis, are comic and meant to induce laughter. This scene, which was not derived from Christie's novel but which constituted an imaginative expansion of the character, emphasized the wittiness with which Mrs Otterbourne presents herself. It mediates the novelist's negative portrayal of the character as unethical, allowing the viewer to understand Mrs Otterbourne as a word master, with slapstick moments. Aldridge rightly recognizes that "Angela Lansbury's Salome Otterbourne lights up the screen whenever she stumbles across it with a drink in her hand" (*Agatha Christie Poirot: The Greatest Detective in the World* 211). In fact, Lansbury recalled: "The director wanted me to play it [Salome Otterbourne's part] larger than life [...] I went way overboard. She was such a lush, that woman" (qtd. in Haining 135). Her



performance responded to how, by the 1970s, her character *could* be read afresh in line with changing ethical thinking, in the process not fundamentally deviating from Christie's conception but omitting her ethical verdict.

Despite the introduction of additional scenes, Lansbury's flamboyant appearance closely follows Christie's script. Unlike the novel's critique of her orientalism, however, none of the other characters comment disparagingly on her apparel: she wears a turban and extravagant art nouveau-style items of clothing. Her character is, furthermore, fleshed out in that she appears far more frequently than in Christie's novel, including in a storyline related to a libel case against her. In that storyline Mrs Otterbourne approaches Linnet Doyle on deck, with the hope of inducing the latter to drop the libel action: this legal suit focuses on Mrs Otterbourne likening Linnet, in one of her novels (not mentioned in Christie's fiction), *Passion under the Persimmon Tree*, to a nymphomaniac character as well as a baboon. Importantly, it is not the veracity of the comparison, but the clear identification of Linnet as notoriously sexually active, that is at stake. The role that Mrs Otterbourne devises for Linnet thus adds to the latter's characterization, not only as unethical in having induced Simon Doyle to abandon Jacqui. But she is also presented, at least in Mrs Otterbourne's work, as the woman of erotic excess as which the novelist wants herself to be understood. In other words, Linnet is characterized as unethical and aberrant, based on what is identified as the reason for her having been able to secure Simon: her sexuality and the way in which her erotic (and chaos-inducing) appeal is unethically exercised.

Another addition by Shaffer concerns Mrs Otterbourne's dancing tango with Colonel Race, a further instance of the comical inflection of the character's rendering. For the tango she performs neither has the traditional associations of sensual dancing inherent in the Argentine milonga nor the melancholy characteristic of early twentieth-century tango. Instead, Mrs Otterbourne's ethical shortcomings are not foregrounded judgmentally, as in Christie's novel, but rather manifest themselves in her indecorous and over-the-top dance behaviour. She uses the opportunity of dancing with Colonel Race as a situation of coercion where he cannot escape from her attentions. In the same context, on the occasion of a visit to a temple, she holds forth to Dr Bessner about passion and physical desire, but—unlike Christie's original—she does not at length talk about the subjects of her books. Also, unlike the sulky and seemingly harsh and discontented Rosalie of Christie's novel, the one of the 1978 production is meek and caring throughout about her mother, revealing—on Mrs Otterbourne's death—how much she loved her. There is a happy ending of sorts in store for her, as she becomes engaged to



Mr Ferguson after her mother's death. Altogether, there is no indication in the 1978 remediation of Christie's mystery that Mrs Otterbourne's ethical failing as a mother correlates with her professional failure. Alcoholism is not adduced as a reason for her discontentment, especially since—unlike Christie's original—her reputation as a writer does not appear to be on the decline: after all, Linnet Doyle's libel case against her is recent and indicates a strong readers' base eager to consume the novelist's sensational works.

Of the all-star cast of *Death on the Nile*, Lansbury's performance was particularly significant in that Shaffer's rewrite of Christie's novel offered a sympathetic version of Mrs Otterbourne, who is neither characterized as "poisonous" nor bitter, as in the original mystery. Lansbury's performance was nominated for the 1978 BAFTA award for Best Supporting Actress and was, in fact, granted the National Review Board award for Best Supporting Actress that year. By contrast, Linnet, who was played by former supermodel and soon-to-be "Bond girl," Lois Chiles, was cast as explicitly unethical in her interactions with others, absorbing through her potentially sexualized construction the focus of moral criticism that, in the 1930s, would have rejected her as not fulfilling her social role as wife (and potential mother).

In contrast to the hilarious comedy scenes in which Shaffer introduced Lansbury, the 2004 film version of *Death on the Nile*, which was broadcast as episode 3 of the ninth season of ITV's series, "Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot," Andy Wilson, the film's director, redefines Mrs Otterbourne's relationship with Poirot. He turns it into a would-be romantic one. Even though the film closely aligns with the increased presence and performance of Lansbury as Mrs Otterbourne, it introduces none of the derogatory characterization of the novelist that had featured in Christie's fiction. Frances de la Tour's eager attempts to attach Poirot to herself as a lover—unethically even against the sleuth's wishes—are foiled by their rhetorical emptiness and the absence, on her part, of real interest in meaningful interpersonal connection. Unlike Lansbury's Mrs Otterbourne, de la Tour's presents herself as a siren whose call must prove irresistible to those she wants to enthrall. This version of the character invokes the violent passion of Wilde's Salome, her advances to the detective being spurned by the personality of a disciplined and, at times, anxious-looking Poirot, whose self-possession is severely tested by Mrs Otterbourne.

Her characterization is made effective by David Suchet's declared aim to portray Poirot authentically and seriously: "I wanted to be as truthful to the original as I could be. I was not going to play Poirot as a caricature" (qtd. in Haining 117). Suchet's punctiliously faithful performance deliberately countered Ustinov's,

for the latter, according to the later actor, “wasn’t rooted in Christie, in that he never attempted to become physically like him, or indeed to pick up the personal eccentricities of the character” (Suchet quoted by Haining 114). One should add that Ustinov’s frequently comical performance was at odds with the ethical identity that Christie had devised for Poirot, especially the strict moral code that induces Suchet’s Poirot to show little tolerance for Mrs Otterbourne. Otherwise charitable, as in when he expresses his sympathy for Rosalie, he—like Christie’s Poirot—identifies in Mrs Otterbourne an ethical threat to acceptable femininity.

Kevin Elyot’s screenplay casts Mrs Otterbourne as combative, and especially her relationship with her daughter closely echoes Christie’s characterization, which had captured the ethical dilemma between a daughter unloved and a mother holding her daughter responsible for a treatment that is the result of her failing reputation as a writer of works no longer attracting readers. In the original mystery, Mrs Otterbourne had made others witnesses to her complaints against her daughter’s neglect, introducing private concerns indecorously into the public world of judgmental gossip on the Karnak:

That girl of mine—no sympathy—no understanding of her poor old mother who’s done everything for her [...] Mrs Otterbourne began to weep. ‘Slaved for her I have—worn myself to the bone—to the bone. A *grande amoureuse*—that’s what I might have been—a *grande amoureuse*—sacrificed everything—everything [...] And nobody cares! But I’ll tell everyone—I’ll tell them now—how she neglects me—how hard she is—making me come on this journey—bored to death [...] I’ll go and tell them now—. (Christie 127)

This melodramatic self-dramatization is an exercise in misrepresentation, the novelist seeking to portray herself as ethically unobjectionable, as both a dutiful mother and as a victim. Importantly, Mrs Otterbourne juxtaposes her understanding of the role of the mother with the role she would have egotistically preferred—that of a great lover, including the hedonistic experience of the erotic as opposed to the vaguely inferred “everything” she has supposedly done for Rosalie. Rather than evoking sympathy for herself, however, Mrs Otterbourne’s accusing her daughter of neglect reflects badly on her, as those who learn about her complaint have previously observed her erratic behaviour. In the process, she is likely to be blamed as much as her daughter.

De la Tour’s Mrs Otterbourne also unconvincingly claims that she supported the cause of the Suffragettes for women to be given the right to vote. But, given

the emphasis she places on her sexualized nature, it is doubtful whether she would have been an effective or desirable supporter of the Suffragettes' cause. For Mrs Otterbourne is constructed by Christie as a selfish individual, rather than as one fighting for the rights of others. In fact, Poirot's role as a detective entails the uncovering of deviance and facilitating for the reader a process of "moral evaluation" (Pyrhönen 4). While the murderers are the criminals he detects at the end of the narrative, his "story of detection" (Pyrhönen 6) also involves the ethical, diagnostic narrative that allows him to judge Mrs Otterbourne as criminal in her non-fulfilment of a traditional gender role. In the process, he "assign[s] guilt" (Pyrhönen 5) which is subsequently punished through Mrs Otterbourne's murder, an unconventional resolution of the ethical dilemma of a woman whose own aberrant and out-of-control behaviour proves fatal to her.

Elyot changes Christie's version of Rosalie's life after her mother's death, for she will not marry Tim Allerton who—it is intimated in the 2004 film—is homosexual and who prefers a close, Platonic connection with his mother to an erotic relationship. Theirs is the kind of doting—even infatuated—relationship that Rosalie is shown not to have entertained with her mother. Allowing Rosalie to find a surrogate mother in Mrs Allerton was Christie's solution to the suffering that the former had undergone as her mother's secret guardian. In Christie's novel, Rosalie's union with Tim reintegrates her into normative society, whereas in Elyot's version she remains on her own, loving Tim but being rejected by him. In this respect, the film presents Rosalie just as erotically frustrated as her mother—the principal difference being that the former has a future ahead of her in which she may find a suitable partner still.

While both the 1978 and 2004 screen versions of *Death on the Nile* expanded the significance and part of Salome Otterbourne, they remained faithful to her characterization as an alcoholic novelist of romantic fiction. The most recent adaptation of Christie's mystery, which was released in early 2022 by 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Fox and directed by Kenneth Branagh, who also plays the part of Poirot, recasts the character entirely: Mrs Otterbourne no longer is a writer but a blues singer. She is not flamboyant in the orientalist manner Christie devised but is a black woman to whom Poirot is attracted. In fact, while both the 1978 and 2004 versions of the character did not affect Poirot's emotional make-up, Branagh's Poirot is such that his engagement with Mrs Otterbourne kindles feelings he is not usually credited with. In fact, the film's conclusion brings both Mrs Otterbourne and Poirot together in a way that is emblematic of his transformation, his moustache shaved off, and his desire for proximity to the singer expressed—beyond the actual ending of Christie's

narrative—by his sitting in a nightclub, listening to Mrs Otterbourne singing.

In contrast to the earlier incarnations of Christie's character played by Lansbury and de la Tour, who both die as a result of their witnessing Jacqueline's entering Louise's cabin to commit murder, Mrs Otterbourne, played by Sophie Okonedo, is not shot. In fact, her significance for a more psychologically complex rendering of Poirot is greater than what Christie had allotted her: she is no longer a minor character but, according to David Rooney, one of the few memorable characters, who is "given some of the juiciest lines" (Rooney 71). Her reimagining is one of the "few modern touches" Michael O'Sullivan mentions in his review of the film, another being the "surprisingly intimate portrayal" (Sullivan 715) of Poirot.

Branagh's remediation of Christie's character entails a process of ethical revaluation, as part of which the stereotypical and grotesque features of the 1937 version of Mrs Otterbourne are left behind to create a racially different individual who—unlike the original author of erotic fiction—does indeed have it in her power to attract Poirot. An interracial relationship is a real possibility for a Poirot, whose longing for love is invoked in the opening black and white sequence, especially since Mrs Otterbourne's niece-manager, who is in love with Bouc, demonstrates that such a love relationship can exist—even though it is cut short through Bouc's murder. Michael Green's screenplay empowers Mrs Otterbourne, not weakening her expressive power through the influence of drink, even though Poirot remarks on her drinking habits, but this comment is not one of censure, as in Christie's work. Deliberately introduced into an ethical environment that is not subject to the race-related restrictions that would have affected a black woman performer in the 1930s, Mrs Otterbourne is not grounded in the historical moment of the original novel. She is emancipated and possessed of a confidence that does not require the stimulus of drink. Her not being cast as a woman obsessed with the erotic fantasies that underpinned the writings of Christie's Mrs Otterbourne removes an essential characteristic that had strikingly showcased her unethical and dysfunctional nature.

Whereas Christie's casting of the character as a novelist had allowed Mrs Otterbourne to derive an identity from the fictionalized world of romance she longs to be real, this belief in the realness of her fantasy makes meaningful engagement and sympathetic identification with other passengers on the Karnak near impossible. The medium of song in Branagh's version of Mrs Otterbourne, by contrast, is a more direct and immediate mode of storytelling and a mood-setting element by which the character is able to capture her audience. For her song invokes communal associations with shared (black) heritage and ethical identity construction. In the 1978 and 2004 adaptations, Mrs Otterbourne's writings, the erotic rhetoric of which

she deploys in real life, jar with her appearance; she is inauthentic and not credible to those who witness her behaviour, whereas Okonedo's Salome Otterbourne is perceived and understood as authentic, as a desirable woman without articulating desire beyond her song.

Branagh's replacement of Christie's character of Mrs Otterbourne with a black woman singer is more than a substitution of one individual by another. The racialization of Mrs Otterbourne underpins her interactions with other passengers of the Karnak, her connection with Linnet Doyle being explained in racial terms as well. For, when a child, Linnet, staying at the same hotel as Mrs Otterbourne, complained of having to share the hotel pool with the singer's niece. Racial segregation is thus invoked and inferred to have been a formative influence on how Mrs Otterbourne interacts with others and especially the privileged white passengers she entertains with her songs. Her experience has not, however, traumatized her and resulted in the way that the outrageous alcoholic versions played by Lansbury and de la Tour are. Rather, her flamboyance is part of her potential casting as a femme fatale, who has been married several times but who always managed to regain her independence of men. Both directly and indirectly, then, Okonedo's Salome Otterbourne is made to serve multiple ethical functions, for she is a product of attitudes towards racial difference that are grounded in twenty-first-century policies of tolerance and acceptance rather than of Christie's 1930s. As such, her character is revalued, in largely positive terms, as a potentially suitable partner for Poirot.

Unlike the ways in which the two previous film versions rendered Christie's character as would-be erotic icons, Okonedo's Mrs Otterbourne is indeed sexualized as a musical performer. It is Okonedo's dramatized attractiveness as part of her professional performance, as well as the power of her song, that touch Poirot in a way no other woman, except his deceased lover, had. Romantic interest appears mutual, but the otherwise verbally astute detective finds himself unable to articulate his desire when speaking to Mrs Otterbourne. In the end, she functions as a cathartic driver, enabling him to move beyond his former lover, as well as the latter's recommendation that he grow a moustache to conceal the scars he had obtained during the war. The removal of the moustache marks a new beginning, his listening to Mrs Otterbourne's song in a night club conveying a sense of his having found a new mode of accessing passion that was previously closed to him. Just as the dependency on drink that Christie made an essential part of Mrs Otterbourne is removed by Green as a means to allow the character to be liberated and empowered, so the removal of Poirot's facial hair signifies the abandonment of a persona that he had adopted to conceal his war injury, including, by extension, the loss of his fiancé,

Catherine.

Compared to Lansbury's and de la Tour's alcoholic romance writers, Branagh's Salome Otterbourne is cast as an altogether different individual with a role she did not possess in Christie's novel. Familiar props are revisited and given new meaning in the process. One characteristic feature—the turban—is introduced. But Poirot expresses surprise at the singer's wearing such headwear, as being out of tune with her avant-garde persona. She replies that, even though the detective may consider the turban an old-fashioned item of apparel, it being deliberately worn by Mrs Otterbourne transforms it, making it essentially fashionable. She thus possesses a transformative power and charm that render objects long outdated into desirable items of apparel, exactly because they are informed by and, in turn, extend Salome Otterbourne's desirability and mystique. In addition, while the turban had functioned as an exotic item of dress for Lansbury and de la Tour, for Okonedo's Salome Otterbourne it not only underscores her personality as defying conventional fashions but it also serves as a discreet receptacle for her hand gun. The gun associates her with danger and an assertiveness that contrasts with all characters but Jacqueline de Bellefort. In this screen adaptation Jacqueline is revealed to be the murderer of Poirot's friend Bouc, in addition to having killed Linnet Doyle's French maid, Louise Bourget. At the end of the film, both Poirot and Mrs Otterbourne threaten her with their respective fire arms. And yet, Mrs Otterbourne's artistic gift and honest outspokenness set her apart from the obsessive Jackie: Jackie represents ethical chaos, although effectively concealed throughout the film, while in the ethical environment of the storyworld Mrs Otterbourne does not.

Okonedo's character possesses real agency and is acutely aware of her ability to allure men, rather than merely desiring what in Christie's version can only be found in the erotic fiction of Salome Otterbourne. Moreover, she is a single woman by choice, having been able to deal effectively with her "handful of husbands," "each a handful," as she reveals to Poirot in the Temple of Abu Simbel. Her character is used to being objectified, being viewed as an erotic entity in the night clubs in which she performs. It is against the background of her singing that Jackie and Simon are introduced dancing in close embrace. Her music underscores the eroticism of the young couple's interaction on the dance floor, just as much as her singing again frames the dance performed by the married Simon Doyle and his wife, Linnet. From the beginning, Poirot's inquisitive eyes are drawn not only to Jackie and Simon, but also to a woman whose nature he is unable to fathom: she proves irresistible to him.

Through the influence of Salome Otterbourne, a new kind of Poirot is portrayed: he is revealed to be tormented and traumatized by his lost love. At the

same time, *Death on the Nile* no longer is about Simon and Jackie's treachery and their plot to kill Linnet for her fortune only, but it is just as much about Poirot's self-discovery and his recognition that Salome Otterbourne could change his life. Branagh's film is not only an adaptation of Christie's novel but also an alternative version of the story that redefines ethical relationships among characters, substituting some characters for others, in the process introducing concerns (such as the lesbian relationship between Bowers and Mrs Van Schuylder, as well as Bouc's transracial love for Mrs Otterbourne's niece, Rosalie) that are absent from Christie's novel. Branagh's production reshapes the story sufficiently to create two primary strands of narrative focus. As a result, it is more than what, in her definition of adaptation, Linda Hutcheon terms "repetition with variation" because the "variation" completely alters the narrative dynamics of Christie's work. The 2022 film is, to use a term from Hutcheon, "palimpsestuous," and, as she argues, "haunted at all times by the [...] adapted text" (Hutcheon 6) because of the serious ethical changes that are introduced into the character of the blues singer. Branagh's film complicates the text-film medial relationship, however, by not only being anchored in a transformation and recoding of Christie's text but also—through the mnemonic lens of viewers' experience—being connected associatively with other remediated versions of the printed work, specifically the two film versions that preceded it. As such, comparisons with the text, as well as with the two earlier films, are invited to demonstrate the interpretive uniqueness of the 2022 film.

Branagh's reinvention of Christie's narrative changes character constellations and relationships and recontextualizes issues of gender, race, and sexuality that create an alternative storyworld for *Death on the Nile*. In significant respects, the film is much more about actualization than about the intertextual relationship and echo Branagh seeks to establish with the 1937 novel. The issue of race, which in the previous two film adaptations had been introduced through the Egyptian ship's crew, and especially through the comical and loquacious manager of the Karnak, played by the Pakistani actor, I. S. Johar, in the 1978 version, gains a new significance in Branagh's film. For race is now central, even Linnet's cousin Andrew being played by Ali Fazal. Okonedo's performance relates the black Salome Otterbourne to the foundational figure of blues, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, whose music became inspirational for such black artists as Aretha Franklin and whose songs are performed in the film. In fact, introducing Okonedo's Mrs Otterbourne—in a rewriting of a text that dates to 1937, at which point the civil right to vote was not yet achieved for black people in America—is a political as well as an ethical statement. The blues singer not only serves as a vocal commentator on



other characters, including their shortcomings, but also provides information on prejudices, including racism, which she herself has experienced.

In this account of the three film versions of Agatha Christie's *Death on the Nile*, I have focused on how screenwriters and directors transformed the character of Salome Otterbourne from odious minor character in Christie's novel to a character whose death is cast as tragic in the 1978 and 2004 versions. Even though the character was a minor one, both Lansbury and de la Tour offered remarkable performances that created memorable castings of Salome Otterbourne, which were still largely aligned with Christie's characterization. The 2004 film, in particular, revisited the text as part of a project to codify the classical status of Christie's Poirot fiction as part of ITV's Hercule Poirot series. And yet, for Branagh, *Death on the Nile* is not a hallowed classic but a storehouse of characters, motivations, and actions that are assembled to produce a fundamentally different work. And the ethical reinscription of Salome Otterbourne is key to this project. While the introduction of the complicated issue of race bestows central importance to the singer as a modern woman, within the historical framework of Christie's novel it is not credible. But fidelity to the original is secondary to the ethical potential Branagh's Mrs Otterbourne possesses for viewers, including how her character can inform a modern understanding of interracial relations. His adaptation not merely departs from the models of the 1978 and 2004 versions of Salome Otterbourne. But he opts to centralize the character, not as part of the plot or the murder mystery but as a force affecting Poirot, who seeks companionship and love, longing to overcome his loneliness. Despite being unconventional, Mrs Otterbourne is not characterized by the stigma that Christie's Poirot understood in terms of the crime of transgressive femininity. Both Lansbury and de la Tour's characters represented exactly that—aberrations of socially acceptable femininity signalled as such through their orientalist cast and their excess. Each of the three versions familiarized audiences with Christie's novel, yet each changed the original, as a result disseminating different iterations of Mrs Otterbourne that updated and revalued her ethical nature.

These updates assigned new meaning to how the character could be understood within the network of other characters, and especially in relation to Rosalie, but also within changing ethical contexts. They represent stages in an alternative history of Christie's detective fiction in which the medium of the screen adapts, reinvents, and reimagines characters and relationships. As a result, *Death on the Nile* is no longer a single, timeless classic but is refracted into numerous polyphonous versions that communicate diverging stories and moral standards featuring ostensibly the same characters. But these characters, even though they bear the names Christie had

given them, are no longer the same and need to be made sense of on their own, new medial, ethical, and adapted terms.

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