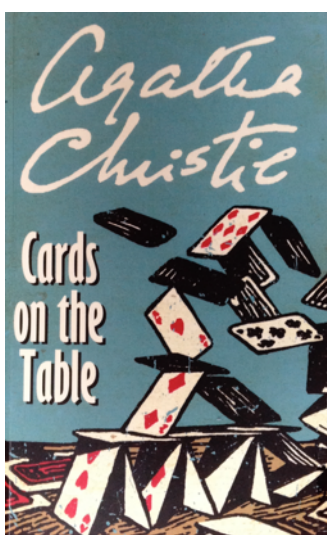


Cards on the Table

1936

[N.B. This review contains PLOT SPOILERS for this novel, but not for other novels]

With a false confession and a mistaken witness, the final chapters appear to reveal first one person and then another as the murderer before Poirot identifies the true culprit. It makes for an ending of twists and turns but it also underlines the novel's central weakness: that the correct solution is arbitrary. So is this simply Christie off form? I think not. It is, rather, a bold experiment that didn't quite come off. Christie was, I think, attempting a new approach to clueing – a new kind of whodunnit. She showed that this approach does not work, but the set-up is so good, the experiment so interesting, and the character of Mrs Ariadne Oliver such fun, that I like this novel better than many that have a more satisfying solution.



The idea for the set up is outlined in Christie's novel *The ABC Murders* which was published earlier in the same year as *Cards on the Table*. At the centre of the novel is the aesthete Mr Shaitana. He could be a character from Oscar Wilde. 'But murder is an art!' he says. 'A murderer can be an artist ... Surely my dear M. Poirot to do a thing supremely well is a justification.' And so this collector of fine things - Chinese furniture, Persian rugs, Japanese prints - decides to collect, for an evening, fine British murderers. 'The caught murderer' he argues, 'is necessarily one of the failures. He is second-rate. No I look on the matter from the artistic point of view. I collect only the best ... the ones who have got away with it.'

Shaitana invites to dinner four people who, he suspects, have previously committed murder and got away with it: Dr Roberts, Major Despard, Mrs Lorrimer, and Anne Meredith. He also invites three detectives and a crime novelist. We have met the three detectives in previous novels: Colonel Race of the secret service in *The Man in the Brown Suit*; Superintendent Battle of Scotland Yard in *The Secret of Chimneys* and *The Seven Dials Mystery*; and Hercule Poirot. Mrs Oliver, is the crime writer. This is the first of Christie's novels in which she appears – we will meet her in many more – although she made her first appearance in the short story *The Case of the Discontented Soldier* published in book form in *Parker Pyne Investigates* in 1934.

After dinner Mr Shaitana sets up two bridge tables. The four possible murderers in one room, and the detectives and Mrs Oliver in another room. Mr Shaitana himself sits by the fire in the room with the possible murderers and, during the course of the evening he is murdered: stabbed with an exotic knife from his own collection.

The murderer must be one of the four who were playing bridge in the room where the murder took place. Each of the four has the same possible motive: that Mr Shaitana might expose the person's previous act of killing to Superintendent Battle at the end of the evening. Nobody, it seems, witnessed the murder. So how can the puzzle of identifying the murderer be solved?

Christie knows that she is trying out something new. And she is worried that readers will not understand or appreciate what she is doing. So she takes the unusual step of writing a 'Foreword' by way of explanation. In the Foreword she explains how the puzzle must be solved. She writes: 'The deduction must, therefore, be entirely psychological, but it is none the less interesting for that, because when all is said and done it is the mind of the murderer that is of supreme interest.' She seems a little unsure herself whether this 'psychological' approach works. At the end of the Foreword she writes: 'I may say, as an additional argument in favour of this story, that it was one of Hercule Poirot's favourite cases. His friend, Captain Hastings, however, when Poirot described it to him, considered it very dull! I wonder with which of them my readers will agree.'

The idea that a murder can be solved by attention to psychology has been important to Christie since early on in her development as a crime writer. Although Poirot started as a Belgian Sherlock Holmes, or perhaps as the more sedentary Mycroft Holmes, he soon tried to distance himself from the Holmesian focus on physical clues – the cigarette ash, the footprint, the strand of hair. Poirot retained, however, Holmes' insistence on logic and reflection – on 'the three pipe problem' – but, at least in his rhetoric, Poirot replaced Holmes' interest in physical clues with an interest in 'psychology'.

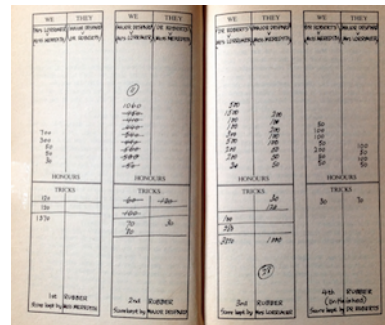
Quite what Poirot means by 'psychology' is not clear. It sometimes seems to include everything relevant to solving the puzzle other than the kind of physical clue that requires close observation. In the Poirot novels since *Murder on the Links* we see him making use of a wide range of types of information in solving the murders – information that is neither clearly psychological, nor physical in the Holmesian sense. Examples of types that do not fit either category include: the possibility of using technology to deceive, the position of a chair, the unlikelihood of extraordinary coincidence, the route taken by a train around a city. It is rare, however, that Poirot genuinely makes use of an understanding of a person's psychology in solving a crime.

I believe that Christie realised that the clues and deductions in her novels were not 'psychological' and that she had not been clear about what the term meant in this context. In *Cards on the Table* she seeks to remedy these omissions. She tries to force herself to write a satisfactory whodunnit using only psychological clues. For the first time, and in her own voice, she tells us what she means by 'psychological': it is to do with the mind of the murderer. What I think Christie is attempting in this novel is to set the reader the task of understanding the minds of each of the suspects, and of constructing what the mind of the murderer must be like, and then solving the puzzle by fitting the one to the other. Poirot puts the issue clearly: 'We know the kind of murder that has been committed, the way it was committed. If we have a

person who from the psychological point of view could not have committed that particular type of murder, then we can dismiss that person from our calculations.’ Hence Christie’s decision to make it crystal clear who are the suspects and limiting their number to four.

How can we build up the psychological profiles of the four suspects? Christie provides three sources. First, how each of the suspects played bridge. Second, each suspect’s past, and in particular the details around a death which may in each case have been murder. Third, the answers the suspects give Poirot when he asks them to describe the contents of the room in which they played bridge.

What is the result of this kind of psychological profiling? The murder, as Poirot says ‘required audacity and nerve – a person who was willing to take a risk’. We learn that Dr Roberts plays bridge boldly. He is something of a bluffer. He tends to overbid his hand, but because he plays well and with confidence he often gets away with it. Major Despard’s character, based principally on his card



play, is described by Poirot as cool and resourceful but that he would not shrink from taking a dangerous way if he believed that there was a reasonable chance of success. Both these people’s psychology seems compatible with the way in which the crime was committed. Mrs Lorrimer is rather different. She is the best bridge player and ‘probably the best brain of the four’. Poirot says that if she were to commit a crime ‘I should expect it to be a premeditated crime. ... For that reason she seems to me slightly more unlikely than the other three [as the murderer]. She is, however, the most dominating personality, and whatever she undertook she would probably carry through without a flaw.’ The reader might well start to think, at this stage, that the murder of Mr Shaitana was less spontaneous than it had seemed. So Mrs Lorrimer remains on the list of suspects. How about Anne Meredith? Timid in her bridge play, careful, and lacking in self-confidence. Surely she is the antithesis of the murderer. But no. Poirot says: ‘But a timid person will murder out of fear. A frightened nervous person can be made desperate, can turn like a rat at bay if driven into a corner.’ None excluded, so Poirot gives up on the psychology of the bridge play. He says: ‘So you see, that does not help us very much. No – there is only one way in this crime. We must go back into the past’.

Poirot, Battle, Race and Oliver undertake to explore the suspects’ pasts and in particular to try and find out what it was that they did that led Mr Shaitana to believe that they were murderers. There are two murders that Dr Roberts may have committed. The first involved infecting a man with anthrax by infecting his shaving brush; and the second was through infecting a woman with an unspecified but fatal disease whilst inoculating her against typhoid. Major Despard shot a man dead in the Amazonian jungle. Despard’s account is that he shot, intending to wound, as the only way of preventing the man from drowning in a river. At the crucial moment, he claims, the man’s wife jerked his arm and the bullet was fatal. The wife’s account is that Despard purposely killed the man because Despard was in love with her. We

learn little about Mrs Lorrimer's means or motives and only, because she confesses it, that many years ago she murdered her husband. Anne Meredith, who worked as a paid companion, possibly killed her employer on purpose by moving a bottle in the bathroom so that her employer drank poisonous hat paint rather than syrup of figs.

Of these murder styles the most similar to that of Shaitana's murder, it seems to me, is Major Despard's – a quick decision, decisive action, accuracy. Poirot, however, never comments on this. Instead he argues, most unconvincingly, that it is the two possible murders by Dr Roberts that 'from the psychological point of view' prove to be 'almost exactly the same' as the murder of Shaitana.

Finally there is the question that Poirot asks about what the suspects remember of the room in which the murder occurred. At the denouement Poirot claims that from this question he 'got some very valuable information'. This 'valuable information' is that Dr Roberts could remember little about the bridge hands. Poirot concludes that this must have been because he spent the evening thinking about murdering Mr Shaitana. If this were the case it is surprising that Dr Roberts could remember so much about the contents of the room.



Christie's experiment in psychological profiling fails as a whodunnit. No reader will be confident in identifying the murderer on the basis of matching the suspects' psychologies with that of the murderer. And indeed it is this failure that enables Christie to put in all the twists and turns towards the end of the novel. The murderer might just as well have been Mrs Lorrimer or Anne Meredith, and so we believe these solutions when they are presented to us.

There is one way in which readers might solve the murder of Mr Shaitana but it does not involve any kind of psychological profiling. It involves taking the following train of thought. The murder must have been committed by 'dummy' – that is the player who lays down their hand in a game of bridge and is therefore not involved in play for that game. Every one of the suspects was dummy at some stage in the evening. In order to minimise the chance of detection the murderer would want the game being played at the time to be very absorbing for all players. Probably the most absorbing type of game is when a grand slam has been bid. At one point in the evening a grand slam was bid. Mrs Lorrimer and Dr Roberts were partnering each other. Mrs Lorrimer says to Poirot: 'I bid five spades and he [Dr Roberts] suddenly jumped to seven diamonds. ... He had no business to make such a call. By a kind of miracle we got it'. By jumping to seven diamonds, Dr Roberts ensured two things: that a grand slam had been bid so the game would be absorbing, and that he would be 'dummy' (because Mrs Lorrimer had bid diamonds earlier in the bidding process).

An astute reader might follow this reasoning. But I don't think that it passes the 'cryptic crossword clue' test: one could not be confident that this solution is correct. After all, Dr Roberts is inclined to overbid his hands and so such behaviour is in character. In any case, the key point is that by far the best clue in the book is not 'psychological' but is a good old-fashioned clue about providing opportunity.

There is one major plot weakness, however, that leads me to conclude that Christie got the solution wrong. The murderer, Christie admits, took a great risk in stabbing Mr Shaitana in a silent room a few feet from three possible witnesses. I think it is more than a risk: it is virtually impossible that the murder could have been carried out without being detected. We are told that the knife when seen in the dead body looked like a shirt stud so presumably Mr Shaitana was stabbed in the front of the neck or in the chest. He must have died either from bleeding, or from a collapsed lung or just possibly from the severing of the spinal cord. In the first two cases death would have taken some time and even had Mr Shaitana been in a deep sleep, or drugged, it is almost inconceivable that he would not have made enough noise to attract the attention of the silent bridge players. Severing the spinal cord would have been very difficult to achieve, and again almost impossible without creating significant noise. Perhaps there was the minutest of chances that Dr Roberts could have got away with it. But why would he take the risk? If Shaitana tells Battle of his suspicions about Roberts, Roberts will simply deny them, and it is very unlikely at this stage that there will be sufficient evidence to convict Roberts or even for the police to pursue a murder enquiry. On the other hand, if he is caught murdering Mr Shaitana, as is very likely, he will almost certainly be convicted of murder. Much the same argument applies to the other suspects. Once we have accepted that none of the suspects would have attempted to kill Shaitana alone, or could have got away with it had they done so, we must conclude that all were complicit. What must have happened is that at some stage the four players realised they were in the same boat: that all were suspected by Shaitana of having committed murder. All must have thought themselves vulnerable if Shaitana were to tell Battle of his suspicions. They must have shared these worries and have decided to kill Shaitana. Who actually stabbed Shaitana is irrelevant: they were all involved in his murder. This is not a solution that Christie would want to propose for reasons that readers of her earlier novels will appreciate but it is the only solution that could fit the facts.

Would Christie have worried about the impossibility of killing a man as silently as her solution requires? Mrs Ariadne Oliver talks a great deal about writing detective fiction – indeed her remarks are some of the most entertaining parts of the novel. At one point she says: 'I don't give two pins about accuracy if I ...say a revolver when I mean an automatic ... and use a poison that just allows you to gasp one dying sentence and no more. What really matters is plenty of bodies!' In detective fiction there can be a fine line between what is acceptable and what is realistic. When Mrs Oliver says to Superintendent Battle that she would have proceeded differently from him 'in a book, I mean' Battle replies: 'Real life's a bit different'. 'I know' responds Mrs Oliver: 'Badly constructed'.



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1930s Art Deco score pad: <http://www.etsy.com/uk/listing/170991200/art-deco-bridge-score-pad-vintage-card?ref=market>

The Cheat. By Georges de la Tour (1635) in The Louvre in Paris:
<http://rijksmuseumamsterdam.blogspot.co.uk/2012/01/georges-de-la-tour-cheat-1635-louvre.html>

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