



Witches and Pharmacists in Agatha Christie's *The Pale Horse*

Sylvia A. Pamboukian

Abstract. At first glance, witches and pharmacists have little in common. Yet Agatha Christie's *The Pale Horse* imaginatively links these unlikely figures through a common desire for greater visibility and social power, offering an astute analysis of the dynamics of self-representation, the consequences of social invisibility, and the benefits of reading beyond the puzzle plot into the seemingly marginal details of detective fiction.

Near the beginning of Agatha Christie's *The Pale Horse* (1961), narrator Mark Easterbrook discusses the “awful witches” in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* with friends David, Hermia, and Poppy in a hip eatery (40). The awfulness is due, they agree, to actors overplaying the roles, so David suggests that the witches ought to be played as ordinary village witches who are “just sly, quiet old women” and “just an ordinary trio of old women” (41–42). Christie's repetition of the words *just* and *old women* emphasizes the unspectacular, taken-for-granted status of old women in village life. Realizing this, Hermia objects that actors love hamming up the witches for attention, and Poppy counters that there are no such things as village witches. On the contrary, David explains, there are plenty of ordinary village witches quietly going about their daily witchery:

There's still a witch in every village in rural England. Old Mrs. Black in the third cottage up the hill. Little boys are told not to annoy her, and she's given a present of eggs and a home-baked cake now and again. . . . if you get across her, your cows will stop giving milk,

Sylvia A. Pamboukian is a University Professor of English and director of the University Honors Program at Robert Morris University. She holds a PhD in English and Victorian studies from Indiana University, an MA in English from Western University, and a BS in pharmacy from the University of Toronto. Her research and teaching areas include Victorian literature, the health humanities, and detective fiction. She is the author of *Doctoring the Novel: Medicine and Quackery from Shelley to Doyle* (2012) and *Agatha Christie and the Guilty Pleasure of Poison* (2022).