Sensitivity Readers Take on Agatha Christie’s Books

by Theodore Dalrymple

In one respect, French law is greatly superior to British or American: It doesn’t allow publishers to alter a text once its author has died. For good or evil, a written work remains the author’s unchanging legacy forever, and if a publisher doesn’t like or is offended by it, that’s tough. The publisher either prints what the writer wrote or refrains from publishing it at all.

This precludes the absurd, but also sinister, retrospective editing of books such as those that Roald Dahl wrote for children, and now Agatha Christie’s detective stories—all in the name of sensitivity to people’s feelings, but in reality to exercise power and control over the population’s thoughts

in the best Stalinist manner.

Of course, there are ambiguous cases. No modern edition of Shakespeare can be precisely as he wrote it, for the simple reason that he oversaw the printing of very little of what he wrote, and the versions that have come down to us differ significantly or, where one version alone exists, are obviously corrupted in the transmission.

Every editor of “Hamlet,” for example, has to choose between two editions published in Shakespeare’s lifetime and one published shortly afterward. Even changes of punctuation can make a considerable difference to meaning or emphasis. The great Shakespeare scholar Dover Wilson punctuated one of the famous soliloquies as follows:

“What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving, how express and admirable in action, how like an Angel in apprehension, how like a God …”

Another great Shakespearean scholar, Wilson Knight, punctuated the same speech as follows:

“What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action, how like an Angel! in apprehension, how like a god!”

The two versions are different in feeling and meaning, and yet both have a textual justification. An editor is obliged to choose between them (I prefer the Wilson Knight version on poetic grounds), and neither is indubitably correct.

But this kind of unavoidable editorial choice is very different from the ideological interference that is the sensitivity reader’s bread and butter (almost literally). The sensitivity reader would object to “What a piece of work is a man!” and change it to “What a piece of work is a person!” And

in apprehension, the person referred to would have to be like a goddess, not like a god.

Now Agatha Christie is to be "corrected" by such readers. That she's the author whose books have sold more than any other in history, in almost every written language, doesn't suggest to them that perhaps she doesn't stand in need of correction, or that readers have been able to take any supposedly "offensive" language in their stride. Even where her characters utter sentiments not completely in accord with current sensibilities, no one could mistake her books for "Mein Kampf."

But the highly intelligent and distinguished American author Joyce Carol Oates not so much approved of, as failed to object to the rewriting of Christie's books, and made the following remark:

"Agatha Christie is not revered as a stylist, nor as a writer reflecting sociological realism; rather, her plots are clever & usually provide some sort of 'twist.' Changing her language will hardly matter as it would in a more literary writer (Twain, Faulkner)."

She thereby missed altogether the sinister intent of the correctors, but in addition, her literary criticism was obviously unsound.

In the first place, Christie's books wouldn't have sold as well as they did (and do) if they were merely "puzzles with a twist," a kind of Rubik's cube in words. They create a distinctive atmosphere that is half-real and half-mythological, as did the stories of Sherlock Holmes. They partake of the qualities both of fairy-tale and realism, which is most attractive. Murder—and the necessary evil to commit it—occurs in her books in places and circumstances where one would least expect it to do so, thus reminding us of the imperfection of Man, but order is always reassuringly restored

in the end by the uncovering of the evil-doer. It’s the possibility of evil lurking in every human heart that Christie reveals to us, though good will triumph in the end.

Oates misses entirely that Christie was a highly intelligent and perceptive woman (she was a nurse during World War I), with a fine sense of irony and subtle understanding of psychology. As an example, I take Dr. Sheppard in “The Murder of Roger Ackroyd.” Dr. Sheppard is both the narrator of the story and the perpetrator of the murder, an intelligent and cultivated general practitioner who is a bachelor living with his spinster sister in an English village. At the beginning of his book, he provides a brief character sketch of his sister, Caroline:

“Caroline can do any amount of finding out by sitting placidly at home. I don’t know how she manages it, but there it is. I suspect that the servants and the tradesmen constitute her Intelligence Corps. When she goes out, it is not to gather in information, but to spread it. At that, too, she is amazingly expert.”

We know the type immediately: the village (or office) gossip who seems to know everything and denounces sin while secretly thrilling to it.

When Caroline says something with which her brother also believes, Dr. Sheppard writes:

“It is odd how, when you have a secret belief of your own which you do not wish to acknowledge, the voicing of it by someone else will rouse you to a fury of denial. I burst immediately into indignant speech.”

This is a fine psychological observation that both comes as a surprise and is obviously true, and surely accounts for much of the shrillness of current political and social discussion. Christie was clever in more than the devising of intriguing puzzles.

Apart from being grossly mistaken as to Christie's qualities as a writer, Oates is of the opinion—and she is far from alone in this—that if a book is not stylishly written and doesn't reflect sociological truth (for what is sociological realism if not sociological truth?), we have the right to alter it as we will.

Good style, however, is in the eyes of the reader, and a Marxist would claim, uniquely, to know sociological truth. Oates, without perhaps really meaning to be so, is clearly on the side of Stalin.

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