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Introduction to Fiction, Crime, and the Feminine

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► **To cite this version:**

Rédouane Mohammed Aboueddahab Abouddahab. Introduction to Fiction, Crime, and the Feminine. Cambridge Scholars Publishing. Fiction, Crime, and the Feminine, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011, 9781443827102. hal-04528037

HAL Id: hal-04528037

<https://hal.science/hal-04528037v1>

Submitted on 31 Mar 2024

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Edited by

Redouane Abouddahab and Joviane Paccard-Huguet

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and Josiane Paccaud-Huguet

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P U B L I S H I N G

Fiction, Crime, and the Feminine,
Edited by Rédouane Abouddahab and Josiane Paccaud-Huguet

This book first published 2011

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-2710-X, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-2710-2

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INTRODUCTION

The form of art called fiction—whether we refer to prose, poetry, or film—has always been the privileged framework, the other scene in space and time (“*not here, not now*”) providing the perfect *alibi*—literally, an *elsewhere*—for facing, framing, and containing the Other’s desire and the strange libido attached to violence: in other words, there is an ambivalent dimension inherent in the scenarios and fantasies we enjoy by proxy. Are not the fairy tales of our childhood full of images of death and violence, whose fascinating presence, contained at the core of the tale, is paradoxically meant to make us feel all the more safely tucked up in bed? After all, the wolf or the Little Red Riding Hood, the monstrous killer or the unfortunate victim are but fictitious characters, mere shifting positions: they are “*not me*”—therefore, thanks to the willing suspension of disbelief process, any reading “I” may shift into their speech or thoughts on the fictional screen, a stage both for projection of and protection from such forbidden enjoyments.

Crime fiction has also for a long time been the genre for such containment. Ever since Victorian “craniology,” criminal violence has remained as resistant as ever to scientific measurement—even to the more recent techniques of investigation of the brain. The classic Agatha Christie story is based essentially on the pleasures of epistemological resolution and mastery of the horror, safely held within a narrative frame. Where women are concerned they were first and mostly fascinating victims but they also nowadays feature in the role of the criminals, adding to the first fascination the mystery of a woman’s desire beyond the pale of societal expectations. The essays in this volume clearly demonstrate that the modalities of containment have also changed through time, for the simple reason that the frames have either collapsed or become uncannily porous. And if we follow Edward Coke’s famous saying which is the basic principle of English law (*actus non facit reum nis mens sit rea*, “an act does not make a man guilty of a crime unless his mind is also guilty,” 1797), it is undeniable that the true lies of fiction have been instrumental to explore the dimension of the mind, especially, concerning female crime, and to convey truths so far repressed or unacknowledged. More and more pieces of crime fiction nowadays refuse to grant the simple pleasures of old: what if, for example, the text refuses to comply to the ‘whodunnit’

convention? What about those stories that instead of closure, will diffuse a mist, a sense of unrest by their emphasis on the inexplicable lure of violence? In other words, gone are the days of the satisfaction granted by traditional closure and return to a solidly structured society, made safe again by the disposal of the scene of violence.

At first sight, the notion of containment is synonymous with that of keeping within limits, of controlling and checking—for example, the spread of a deadly disease. Crime involving female characters has always been the object of ideological and cultural control, especially through the dominant male gaze. Early or popular crime fiction provides the ideal stage for more or less patent stereotypes of romance, set within voyeuristic fantasies where the woman murderer or victim cannot have a voice because she is the *object* of attention and discourse. The first thing to do for the contemporary, post-feminist novelist will be to shift her position from object of the gaze, to that of viewing/perceiving subject. The structure of the imaginary scenario changes, and the modalities of vicarious enjoyment shift, too. Most of the papers in this volume insist on the innovative montage effects produced by a wide range of narrative and linguistic strategies: spatial and temporal fragmentation of information which no longer follows a linear pattern, new economies of gaze and voice, pastiche and parody that deconstruct the frame, whose effect, among others, is to make the reader's epistemological stance far more insecure.

Containment as framing: generic, scientific, ideological

The most obvious forms of ideological containment concern the representation of women according to a fixed set of binary opposites and stereotypes that both reflected and dictated their place as bourgeois mothers and wives, servants, housekeepers, and so forth—like the silent “angel in the house” or the raving “madwoman in the attic” in Victorian culture. As is well known by now, woman in nineteenth century expectations will be either angel or devil, at best a heroine of some stature enmeshed in a tragic pattern—but nothing in between such extremes, like a simple human being with her own sufferings, responsibilities and acts.

The prevailing popular Victorian image of the ideal woman and wife is indeed best represented by the figure of the “angel in the house,” originally the title of a long narrative poem by Coventry Patmore, where the poet, who sees in his own wife the perfect Victorian lady, consecrates the virtues of the self-sacrificing, compassionate, submissive and especially *pure* feminine figure. This ideal woman was, indeed, as

Virginia Woolf says in a paper read to the Women's Service League titled "Professions for Women," (1931)

intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it—in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all—I need not say it—she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty—her blushes, her great grace. (Woolf)

Purity refers of course to the absence of sexual *desire*. As the poem goes, it is woman's duty, or rather pleasure to please her husband, not herself: "Man must be pleased; but him to please / Is woman's pleasure. [...]" (Patmore 135) Woman absorbs and transfigures her husband's sins:

And if he once, by shame oppress'd,
A comfortable word confers,
She leans and weeps against his breast,
And seems to think the sin was hers. (Patmore 136)

"The Angel in the House" went nearly unnoticed when it was first published in 1854; yet it became increasingly popular through the last decades of the nineteenth century, and came to symbolise in feminist criticism the very expression of repression. Virginia Woolf denounced this popular image:

[...] while I was writing this review [about a novel written by a male writer], I discovered that if I were going to review books I should need to do battle with a certain phantom. And the phantom was a woman, and when I came to know her better I called her after the heroine of a famous poem, The Angel in the House. It was she who used to come between me and my paper when I was writing reviews. It was she who bothered me and wasted my time and so tormented me that at last I killed her. (Woolf)

This is not a personal problem; it is the problem of any woman writer: "Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer." (Woolf)

Strange or anachronic as it might seem, bringing the Angel back to life has been the main preoccupation of science fiction movie directors. As Danièle André's study shows, science fiction movies make it difficult to identify significant features of women characters involved in crimes, whether they are criminals or victims. In general, they are "either ghostly

presences or archetypal female characters (the damsel in distress, the woman as reward);” and “unlike other film genres, science fiction does not let women be mean or cruel.” Hence, if woman is denied sexuality as a pleasure (and not as a reproductive function), she is at the same time denied the possibility of being a criminal. The parallelism is worth being examined. What we have here is a denial that concerns the interference of the death drive with the sex drive. It is as if woman were on the side of the instinct, which implies a reduction of human libido to a mere force of reproduction whose aim is to perpetuate the species. If, then, woman indulges in pleasure, she endangers the cycle of reproduction. If she indulges in criminal activity (especially murder), she not only subverts the social order, but annihilates the life cycle. When pleasure and crime are united in the subversive act, woman then becomes satanic and monstrous.

This is what the so-called “Newgate novels” show. These narratives, that belong to the intense production of crime literature in the Victorian era, make women part of the criminal world as well as men, but, while criminal men are considered as heroic, “criminal women are seen as corrupted, or even corruptive,” as Hubert Malfray contends. The fiction is here overdetermined by reality, and the novel is nothing but the representation and conditioning of this reality, not its critical probing. The novels dealt with in Malfray’s study show how women are “encapsulated in an ideological circle from which they cannot escape.” Women are confined to traditional patterns and rules that have to be obeyed, not discussed, let alone transgressed. Ideological discourse considers female crimes as being mechanically linked with their sexuality, that is, the very mark of their bestiality. These novels might be said to be ideologically mimetic insofar as they reproduce the social condemnation of female criminality. Moreover, they seem to enhance the criminalization of women, thus producing in turn a sexually marked discourse which follows a “law of gender.” Deviant women are seen as *natural*, not cultural beings, that is, on the side of the real that should be repressed or kept at bay. Dispossessed of their speech, reduced to screams or groans, they give the impression that they are dangerous beings whose disorders continuously threaten society.

Only uneducated women are involved in criminal activity (contrary to men: even the educated among them are likely to commit crime). Women from well-educated backgrounds cannot commit crime. The “sensation novels,” that followed on from the Newgate novels also deal with this question. Victorian readers were thus encouraged to read the fictionalised stories of sensational criminals, in parallel with those published in newspapers. Most of these novels are centred on criminal biographies and

focus on a whole range of transgressions: bigamy, theft, insanity, murder... They appear to subvert the idealistic vision of woman and mother, and to recognize the universality of the death drive. Hence the existence of two “clashing visions” of womanhood as Marion Charret-Del Bove has it: the idealistic and the realistic. According to the first one, well-mannered and lady-like women are beyond the shadow of suspicion. Indeed, says the author, “the very notion of female criminality is impossible to maintain because it would shatter the whole system of beliefs and values.” A lady is a poor creature and a sentimental victim not a criminal. The second vision recognises feminine guilt. Sensation novels, such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) or Wilkie Collins’s *Armada* (1866), present the “truth” beyond the idealistic façade. The “angel in the house,” albeit well educated, turns out to be as dangerous as the common female convicts that were being tried at the time in open court for murder. Hence, beneath angelic and beautiful smiles, there hide the most horrible secrets, namely their criminal activities as bigamists, arsonists and murderesses. The two narratives gradually focus less on female criminality than on female insanity, thus following the current medical discourses about women and crime. By calling into question the notion of feminine *mens rea*, sensation fiction manages to displace the threats posed by female characters and female criminality in general into the less menacing domain of female psychiatry. “Sensation novels helped their readers rethink the unspeakable truth at the heart of the paradoxical Victorian ideology, and translate female criminality in the very language of insanity.

The literary quality and range of Braddon’s and Collins’s works are different, and one might be well advised to share James’s opinion when he says in a review of the New York edition (1865) of the recently published *Aurora Floyd* by Braddon:

[...] Although Mr. Collins anticipated Miss Braddon in the work of devising domestic mysteries adapted to the wants of a sternly prosaic age, she was yet the founder of the sensation novel. Mr. Collins’s productions deserve a more respectable name. They are massive and elaborate constructions—monuments of mosaic work, for the proper mastery of which it would seem, at first, that an index and note-book were required. They are not so much works of art as works of science. (James 122-123)

Maybe a much more firm distinction should be made between Dickens and the other Newgate novelists. This said, the critic might wonder why serious writers such as Collins and Dickens wrote novels that were or could be associated to the Newgate fiction and the sensation novel. Their

interest lies in theme not in genre, and proves that “something” else is at stake in these texts. The theme of criminal femininity says more than what is seemingly allowed by the genre. This “something” has to do with the fascinating feminine *jouissance*, that these serious writers tried to probe while wearing the mask of the sensationalist or Newgate novelist.

What does a woman want? Paradigmatic shifts

Françoise Couturier and Jeffrey Storey’s essay concentrates on Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace*, the story of Grace Marks, a 16 year-old housemaid who was an accomplice in the double murder of her employer and his housekeeper in Northern Ontario in the 1850s. Atwood’s fiction is always based on documentary evidence and archival work, but this is only where the novelist’s task begins: the reading contract of what first looks like a “historical novel,” the authors argue, changes into a “highbrow romance” raising questions like: what is the kind of truth delivered by the newspapers, does it not often include the reader’s/spectator’s own generic bias, is it not itself contaminated by beliefs on women, religion or early psychiatry? What about the voyeuristic gaze, the limits between reality and fantasy within the scientific observer? Atwood chooses to destabilize the ideological frame by her own narrative geometry, based here on the model of a patchwork fabric, beautifully crafted out of skilfully arranged scraps: thus Grace is given a voice of her own, itself juxtaposed with other contradictory voices as the novel’s feminist and didactic purpose “tend to get lost in a maze of erotic fantasies.”

The greatness of fiction lies in the mutability of the medium, on its capacity for renewal and subversion of the *alibidinal* scenario. Jean-Charles Perquin’s essay on Browning’s *Men and Women* (1855) underscores the potentialities offered by the dramatic monologue delegated to speakers enjoying fully the narration of some criminal fantasy, and among them women endowed with a freedom of speech and thought unknown so far: “Whether woman is a victim or a criminal, whether she is the one who transgresses the rules or trespasses the limits, or the victim of such a transgression,” she seems here to materialise the uncertain threshold on which Browning’s soliloquists stand: “Our interest is in the dangerous edge of things,” one of them claims, and Browning’s women do have their say in terms of the *mens rea*, without being presented as “errors of nature” for all that: they are just criminals, able to plan the murder of a rival, deriving eerie enjoyment, enjoy-*meant* in their tale of sadistic fantasy. We witness a turning point in the representation of woman as she now responds for her own murderous act or intentions.

But is the change of focus and transfer of agency enough? Can a feminist version of the crime novel be reduced to a mere reversal of the

basic plot structure, asks Marie-Odile Pittin-Hedon in her essay on contemporary Scottish female writers of crime fiction (Denise Mina, Louise Welsh, Val Mc Dermid)? Their novels do eliminate “safety and closure, moving away from the traditional reliance on the figure of the detective,” who may, for example, turn out to be a murderer. As to the representation of the victim, Denise Mina mentions the interest of such an accessible medium as a possible vehicle for diffuse anger at the mutilation and abjection of the tortured female body, a favourite *topos* for the voyeur. An unheard history of women appears in filigree through the female voices that deliver their actual experience often in terms of sexual abuse in childhood, and marriage with a violent partner. Lesbian crime fiction often combines the parodic with the erotic, something quite different from the simple pleasures afforded by epistemological resolution. The shift of women into subjects rather than objects, the play with sexual and gender orientations, the revenge against the complacency of the genre can then be a satisfaction of its own, another kind of cathartic purgation of the affect that breaks through the old stereotypes about both victim and murderer.

Much of the disgrace that befalls Hardy’s heroines, namely Tess of the d’Urberville and Eustacia Vye, draws on the way their “enjoyment” is perceived and denied by society. For, as Annie Ramel shows, though adultery is not committed, the female protagonist is branded adulteress. Indeed, Tess of the d’Urberville is labelled right from the beginning a murderess, and her feminine “fate” leads her unmistakably to the gallows. Eustacia Vye symbolically “kills” her mother-in-law by a Medusa-like gaze, a silent look through a windowpane. She too is a murderess, the “adder” whose evil eye stings to death the older woman. Annie Ramel raises a relevant question in her paper: for what *real* crime are these female characters punished? And why should feminine enjoyment be tangled up with crime? The author is aptly aware of the limitations of literature, let alone two novels, in unriddling a problematic question that involves, at the least, the history and anthropology of feminine repression. Yet, Lacanian psychoanalysis provides one part of the answer. The two heroines experience forms of enjoyment or *jouissance* that are complex and enigmatic. Their enjoyment is structurally “adulterous,” insofar as women, being “non-all” and having consequently access to *an Other* *jouissance* which is “more than” phallic *jouissance*, men feel betrayed by this *jouissance* which is “beyond the phallus.” In this regard, as Philippe Julien has it, “feminine adultery” is a structural truth. Eustacia and Tess form red stains on reality because they are “points of contact with the Real of enjoyment,” silent “spots” loaded with a surplus *jouissance* that comes in excess of symbolic reality. The “spot” fills the place that is normally left vacant by the extracted “object-gaze.” These figures of feminine enjoyment are quite logically turned into scapegoats, whose tragic

exclusion achieves the purgation of passions.

The purgation of passions is also at the core of *Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All*. Here woman uses her own voice, not as a writer, but at least as a narrator, in order to tell her story and her husband's. In fact, she takes revenge on the nineteenth century patriarchal order that led to the Civil War and to racial segregation in the American South. The heroine not only kills the "angel in the house," but literally puts to death her jailer. Marie-Agnès Gay's study explores the complex pattern of crime, guilt, and confession in Allan Gurganus's novel, where the narrator, ninety-nine-year-old Lucy Marsden, widow and confident of "the final vet of the War Betwixt States," is the repository of first-hand tales about the Civil War. She thus initially sets out to pass on her husband's stories of soldierly pain and guilt. Yet the reader soon realizes that the real fight and killing happen on another front, that of the text itself. From a mere intermediary, Lucy Marsden gradually takes centre stage. No longer a mere widow but a full-fledged individual, and breathing as much life into her narrative as most veterans in their war tales, Lucy engages into a telling act that proves less innocent than first meets the eye: using her narrative as a weapon, Lucy Marsden wages a war against white patriarchal discourse and turns into a symbolic murderer. When, in the final twist of her long winding tale, Lucy kills her husband, the textual murder is actualised and Lucy's metamorphosis from confessor into murderer and confessant completed.

Containment and transmission

To contain may also mean to enclose, to accommodate, to hold something without crowding or inconvenience. Here the emphasis is less on control and restraint, than on giving room to, on harbouring some unwanted host—both a friend and an enemy, as the etymology indicates—who needs to be wrapped in a fictional semblance to be acceptable, and yet welcomed. The more we move into the area of the contemporary novel, the less constraining narrative frames seem to be, and the more porous and receptive to such disturbing knowledge as the erotic stimulation of death, the ambivalent co-presence of Eros and Thanatos among men and women.

Elisabeth Bouzonviller's essay on Louise Erdrich's novel *The Master Butcher's Singing Club* is particularly relevant to this modality of diffuse containment whereby an unspoken truth oozes through, in half words and remote echoes, raising the question of responsibility beyond the terms of the 'whodunnit' convention. This novel of an American lady Macbeth set in the context of American Indian history is a case of reconstruction, this time more in the way of the irregular crazy quilt pattern where some

scraps may retrain traces of blood or old wounds. The multiple focalisation, the ghostly effects of the textual voice, the “insistent metaphor of meat and butchery” outline an opaque, traumatic kernel, a vanishing point in the picture which is both a stain and a soft spot, aligned against the dark background of American Indian history. Erdrich’s writing, which “often relies on derision and humour as antidotes to tragedies, pictures an America that is not idealistic and forgetful, but mixed, like her heritage.” Here the novelist mingles fiction and history to produce another kind of family romance, focused on the symbolical mother figure as purveyor of identity, based on the oral passing on of memory. Erdrich’s story of rescue and survival does not seek to erase the blood stains quilted into her pattern, it is a humanizing labour whereby the blood that was shed is channelled back into the living pattern of a new creation.

To Joseph Conrad, who once said that the “true anarchist” in his *Secret Agent* was Winnie Verloc, the “feminine” he deals with cannot be understood by scientific discourse or knowledge. Josiane Paccaud-Huguet’s study explores the textual and thematic subtleties and complexities of Conrad’s novel. She demonstrates that the underlying question raised by Conrad concerns the “artist’s response to the feminine forces of anarchy.” *The Secret Agent* does not allegorise the “new woman,” but shows how her crime breaks through the rigid, oppressive ideological Victorian frames. In point of fact, Conrad shows in his writings that the world, society are unreadable, and that the truth comes forth “through some *punctum*-like object whose hyper-reality provokes a flash of insight.” The novel highlights the other side of reality, not what lies *there*, far from the sphere of the subject, but what lies *here*, within reach, those subversive and disruptive forces that partake of the same reality. These forces (at work in the covert plot) reverse the surface plot where political anarchy is represented. Winnie Verloc kills the Angel when she leaves behind the Victorian woman she has been so far. And yet, she does not “step into freedom for all that: the blind hole will catch up with her and suck her in.” Yet, what Paccaud-Huguet’s study is interested in is not the nature of Winnie’s crime, but the gaze as silent object that prevents the *representation* of truth, and the feminine forces of anarchy that act upon the text. One of the study’s merits is the way it examines the truth that radiates from the “sinister marvel” this anarchy is.

Crime fiction, with predominantly female transgressors, also provides the ground for probing further into the Freudian question of what a woman wants—both in terms of desire and lack—and we are not at the end of our surprises here. Edna O’Brien’s novella *Johnny I hardly knew you*, Claude Maisonnat argues, harbours the unpalatable truth that if there is no such thing as the perfect romantic fit between men and women, there is such a

thing as unlimited feminine jouissance beyond the law of desire, precisely based on lack. Nora, a middle-aged woman inexplicably kills her young lover, and it is impossible to reach a logical and definitive conclusion as to her responsibility. There is ample evidence of extenuating circumstances in her gloomy childhood, and marriage to a violent man. The first-person narrative revolves around a traumatic event, the murder, approached “in a circular, roundabout way, because the narrator is confronted with the impossibility of telling.” Nora’s quasi-incestuous relationship with her young lover, obviously a son figure, is based on the delusion of ideal communion and fusion, the true guilt, Maisonnat argues, being that of denying alterity in the partner, thus giving up on what made her a desiring woman: “She gives up on her desire, which ought to be the desire of the Other, but turns into an irrepressible longing for the imaginary plenitude and fulfilment of deadly jouissance.”

Which leads us to the artist’s own responsibility of accommodating the unspeakable, the deadly disease whose symptoms are no longer a matter of repressed meaning that should be told fully in order to be dealt with, and then forgotten. The symptom, rather, insists as the ciphered trace of unconscious satisfaction, the remainder of an ambivalent bliss beyond meaning, which writing alone will contain within the circle of repetition, and host in the very substance of the letter, in *dying falls* that spoil the reader’s ear. The luscious prose of Toni Morrison is exemplary here. It reveals, Rédouane Abouddahab argues, the ontological knot binding together crime, love, and the feminine. Even though Morrison’s work is historically well documented, most of the time the causes of violence and crime cannot be simply seen on a socio-symbolic plane, however deficient the Name-and-No of the political father. Her figures of the majestic, auratic “Other woman” are both extremely loving and violent, determined to have the last word: to put it differently, unsubjected to the symbolic law of speech that initiates the circuit of unsatisfied desire. We move into the area where the angel in the house would not tread: where the sensual and the deadly interlock beyond the pleasure principle, where the motifs of scapegoating and sacrifice are insufficient to appreciate the complexity of what a mother wants. Ultimately what forcefully determines writing, Abouddahab observes, is “not the historical trauma (whose active presence in the fiction cannot be denied), but some unresolved traumatic event or exclusion that makes one write and, through the writing, quest bliss, but that also makes one renounce the attachment to the inevitably lost bliss.”

Crime fiction involving female writers and figures actually makes it clear that, beyond the dialectics of crime and punishment, the symbolic order is unstable, and needs to be endlessly reasserted and refigured by the writing act which is itself a mode of containment: more disturbingly still,

it appears that transgression and criminal activity are constitutive of the symbolic order. Fiction alone will be able to convey a truth that does not necessarily please civilisation and therefore needs to be robed within semblances. As to the ethical task of the novelist as artist, it will precisely consist in shaping out the unspeakable, making you feel the presence of the real of enjoyment at the core of human activity. If, in the case of crime fiction, female writers find a ground to give free play to the *jouissance in excess* of symbolic ordering, it will not be *without* the latter, because the symbolic order is first and foremost the power of the word that both divides and unites, moderating thus human relations: this is the only meaning of what Lacan calls the paternal *metaphor*.

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