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Feminism Is Criminal

Surely if a woman committed a crime like murder, she’d be sufficiently cold blooded to enjoy the fruits of it without any weak-minded sentimentality such as repentance.

(Agatha Christie, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*)

A writer need not call herself a feminist nor be female for her writing to be concerned with ‘feminist’ questions of power, gender and the social roles of women. Although of these six novelists, only the later writers would accept the label ‘feminist’, all six authors, as professional women in a century of rapid social change, are inevitably fascinated by tensions over female participation in society. Unsurprisingly, given the focus on the domestic as the location of crime, the nature of marriage, mothering and single women proves significant sources of passion, conflict and familial drama. Feminist critics traditionally employ a three-pronged approach to imaginary works: they examine the representation of women and the feminine in literature; with women writers they explore factors such as gender, writing and genre; and they increasingly probe and question structures of gender themselves. Many of the foregoing chapters have considered the latter two aspects, gender and genre (see Chapter 2), and the construction of gender itself in such contexts as the Gothic, psychoanalysis, the metaphysical, Englishness and social hierarchies.

This chapter will concentrate on the direct representation of women in the novels. It will move from the depiction of women in the traditional family to women and work, to questions of sexuality, power, and ultimately to how and when the authors’ shaping of the genre portrays women as victims, criminals and detectives. Lastly, I consider whether the writers’ representation of the feminine suggests (perhaps without
intending to) a feminist ethical attitude. Should contemporary feminism re-evaluate authors habitually considered conservative on gender? But first, to the perennially vexed topic of women in employment, in marriage and as parents.

Suspect women (1): work, marriage and mothering

The best remedy for a bruised heart is not, as so many people seem to think, repose upon a manly bosom. Much more efficacious are honest work, physical activity and the sudden acquisition of wealth. (Dorothy L. Sayers, *Have His Carcase*3)

Work, marriage and mothering provoke distinctive responses from all six writers. From Margery Allingham’s rather strained portrayal of a long-term marriage in *The Beckoning Lady* to Barbara Vine’s fascination with mothering as a source of intense, even sublime emotions, such bonds provide sources of dark passions.4 Agatha Christie’s habitual portrayal of robust jollity surrounding her heroic women tends towards a renegotiation of traditional roles. Her works promote female self-expression, but finally do not trouble conventional social structures. The playful exuberance of Tuppence in *Partners in Crime* explicitly rejects the closure of traditional romance in declaring herself dissatisfied with the mundane ‘happy ever afterwards’ of her marriage.5 Nevertheless, her energies remain contained within matrimony as she embarks on a series of parodic detective quests with her husband, Tommy. What marks the cessation of this narrative of marriage-detecting partnership is the wholly conventional advent of maternity. Yet even here, Tuppence’s vigorous personality allows the novel to represent pregnancy as a continuum of self-fulfilling adventures within traditional feminine domesticity. Announcing her news to Tommy, Tuppence says that motherhood will be ‘[s]omething ever so much more exciting … something I’ve never done before’.6

Similarly, the potentially disturbing impact of professional women on conventional family patterns is typically resolved by the forthright independence of Christie’s women finding true happiness within the world of family rather than employment. Midge Hardcastle of *The Hollow* takes an unpleasant job rather than being financially dependent upon her relatives.7 Although her beloved Edward appears as knight errant to rescue her with an offer of marriage, it is she who proves the stronger hero, subsequently rescuing him from a suicide attempt. Like Lucy Eylesbarrow of *4.50 from Paddington* (who significantly puts her