In the period between the start of the Great Depression in 1929 and the aftermath of World War II, the United States underwent a large number of social, political, and cultural changes. One manifestation of these changes was the redoubled effort to fight crime through a rather draconian policing ideology in response to an increase in urban crime, gangsterism, and corruption. This trend was intimately related to the emergence of hardboiled crime fiction in general and to the prevalence of the criminal woman in this genre as a figure who communicated an anxiety about security and maintaining order. Moreover, the social structure of American society was undergoing important changes, including shifts in prevailing attitudes towards gender roles and familial relationships. Broadly speaking, the shifts in gender roles that grew out of the efforts of the women’s movement to gain political rights were translated in different ways that range from the hard-won gains that the “New Woman” seemed to enjoy in the 1920s; to the rescinding of this freedom during the Depression of the following decade; to women’s subsequent involvement in the wartime economy and an unprecedented rate of women’s employment during World War II; and, finally, to a return to a more repressive ideology towards women in the 1950s. Responding to dramatic social changes, hardboiled crime fiction was in dialogue with these different facets of the complicated American scene. Yet the question of the representation of women as dangerous and criminal extends beyond historical factors, important as they are, to broader criminological and medical discourses. This chapter addresses the tension between literary and criminological discourses, shedding light on the question of gender and crime and how established conceptions of gender and gender roles contribute to the construction of women’s criminality in American culture at large. The examination
of criminological texts, views, and theories of female criminality all serve to shed light on various aspects of this issue, and thereby lay the groundwork for the analysis of women in crime fiction to be developed later in this study. An understanding of the trajectory that covers a wide range of studies and theories of female criminality is important to the exploration of how perceptions of women's crime have developed over time and how this change is reflected in the representation of women in hardboiled crime fiction.

The image of the nonaggressive woman

Criminological scholarship shows that the image of criminal women in crime literature is no less a construction than that found in fiction, and this construction is based on the entrenched view that women are passive. It is often assumed that women are less criminal than men.30 The widespread acceptance of gender differences in crime can be attributed in part to a long history of consigning women to submissive, nonviolent, and dependent gender roles. This view is affirmed in similarly prevalent assumptions about a gender gap in criminal behavior. A large number of scholars working in the field of criminology have maintained that women commit fewer crimes than men. For example, Darrell and Renee Steffensmeier state that women are “not catching up with males in the commission of violent, masculine, or serious crimes”31 but acknowledge that there is more parity with respect to larceny and white collar crime (1980: 80, original emphasis).32 Allison Morris points to the fact that statistics in various jurisdictions suggest that recorded crime is “overwhelmingly a male activity” (1987: 19–20); Ann Campbell likewise notes that women’s aggression “takes place less often than men’s” and that the former is often “unrecognized and frequently misunderstood” (1993: 1).

Although criminology is still a male-dominated discipline in both its subject-matter (focusing disproportionately on male crime) and its researchers (who are disproportionately male),33 feminist criminologists have nonetheless instigated a shift in perspectives and methodologies pertaining to the study of women’s crime. Downplaying the issue of the gender gap, some argue that women are as capable of committing crimes as men, and that they are as culpable as men in the commission of these acts. For example, in “Deconstructing the Myth of the Nonaggressive Woman: A Feminist Analysis,” Jacquelyn White and Robin Kowalski argue that women have the same potential as men to commit violent acts. White and Kowalski examine various factors