

**Imagined Criminalities: The New Woman and Crime**

*Framed: The New Woman Criminal in British Culture at the Fin de Siècle*. Elizabeth Carolyn Miller. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2008. 284pp.

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<1> At the end of the nineteenth century, a new kind of fictional female criminal emerged in Britain. Divorced from representations of “real” criminal women, the “New Woman Criminal” of fiction and film was the product of the late Victorian imagination rather than the headlines. In *Framed*, Elizabeth Carolyn Miller situates the emergence of this criminal trope as a reaction to the rapidly changing modern world. In her engaging analysis of fin-de-siècle crime narratives, Miller examines how the New Woman Criminal was used to explore social and political tensions associated with modernity. In doing so, she rectifies what can now only be defined as a critical blind spot to the specific characteristics of the late-century female criminal.

<2> Combining elements from both the New Woman and other late-century law-breakers, the New Woman Criminal inhabited a distinctive cultural space of her own. The New Woman Criminal, like other late-century feminists, represents women’s increased participation in the public sphere; however, the New Woman Criminal challenges domesticity and locates her place in public life by transgressing the law. While New Women were commonly labeled as “mannish” or “unfeminine,” the New Woman Criminal avoids these stereotypes by being seductively glamorous and actively using her femininity to manipulate her victims and the law. The New Woman Criminal also transcends some of the negative stereotypes attached to late-century fictional male criminals, who are often portrayed as brutal, degenerate, or, in some cases, inept. Even though she shares their immorality, the late-century female criminal is elegant, capable, and even admirable. The New Woman Criminal embodies the political and consumer savvy of the New Woman, along with the immorality of the male criminal, to effectively manipulate the social and economic opportunities offered by modern society.

<3> Central to the New Woman Criminal’s success is the modern emphasis on the visual, which she manipulates in order to navigate the precarious public sphere. Miller argues that by carefully crafting her public image, the New Woman Criminal “promote[s] a *consumerist* rather than a *disciplinary* theory of individual identity” (5). By taking advantage of the opportunities provided by emerging mass consumerism, the New Woman Criminal constructs various “identities” through disguise, cross-dressing, and cosmetics, in order to circumvent disciplinary cultural norms. By “looking” feminine and glamorous, the New Woman Criminal also defies scientific

criminological typing that masculinized female criminals. Miller shows how this female criminal calls into question the effectiveness of criminological science by using her femininity to avoid detection and legal consequences.

<4> The New Woman Criminal emerged at a time of widespread social changes, and she is often linked with the fraught social and political issues of the era, particularly first-wave feminism, democracy, terrorism, and the tense division between public and private space. Miller examines the interconnections between the New Woman Criminal and these fin-de-siècle issues through three late-century crime genres that share similar aesthetic and thematic concerns: detective series, crime film, and the dynamite narrative. Authors and filmmakers working within these genres use the female criminal to explore the problems and pleasures of modernity.

<5> The two chapters of Part I, which investigate the New Woman Criminal in detective series, look at Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories and L.T. Meade's collection, *The Sorceress of the Strand* (1903), and deal with the limits of visual knowledge. In the Doyle chapter, Miller lays out the connections between late-century detective series and the rise of illustrated magazines. The illustrated magazine's privileging of pictorial material mirrors Holmes' dependence on primarily visual clues, and Miller examines how the female criminal subverts visual epistemologies by manipulating her bodily image. While the chapter includes references to many Sherlock Holmes stories, it focuses mainly on "A Scandal in Bohemia" (1891), in which the New Woman Criminal Irene Adler outwits the famous detective. Even though Adler has baffled other detective attempts, Holmes mistakenly underestimates her capabilities because she is a woman. Adler circumvents Holmes' visual acumen through cross-dressing, proving that visual clues can be misleading and that the New Woman Criminal's body resists visual and criminological classification.

<6> As a woman writer, L.T. Meade provides a different perspective on the female criminal in *Sorceress of the Strand*. While Meade's Madame Sara also challenges visual epistemologies, Meade is more willing than Doyle to celebrate the power women can gain from manipulating their personal image. In perhaps the best chapter of the book, Miller connects *The Sorceress of the Strand* to the mid-century criminal Madame Rachel, but argues that Meade presents a much more feminist creation than was offered in earlier conceptions of this female offender. Like Rachel, Meade's Madame Sara operates a cosmetics shop where she helps patrons manipulate their body image. As a successful entrepreneur and a criminal, Madame Rachel encourages women's participation in the public sphere and frames women's economic power as a form of feminism. Her cosmetic creations are presented as "scientifically" engineered, showing that fin-de-siècle women were ready to move into the male-dominated arena of science. In addition, the exotic ingredients of Madame Rachel's potions signal the global implications of women's consumption and connect women to the imperial project.

<7> Part II deals with the New Woman Criminal in early British cinema, emphasizing the deep ties between fin-de-siècle criminal fictions and film. Miller finds significant overlap in how fiction and film dealt with the New Woman Criminal, but she argues that film even further developed the feminist possibilities inherent in an image-centered consumer culture. Focusing on the surviving episodes of the film series *The Exploits of Three-Fingered Kate*, Miller shows how

the filmic interpretation of the New Woman Criminal was more explicitly positive than contemporary fictional representations. By robbing the upper classes, characters like Three-Fingered Kate also connected with a more working-class audience than similar characters in fictional works. Yet while Kate's exploits may defy the patriarchy, the films promote capitalism and inter-class democracy. This chapter also briefly examines films about militant suffragettes, finding that these women are depicted as masculinized (thus reaffirming criminological typing) while the New Woman Criminal is presented as glamorous. A single female criminal could be imagined as a feminist symbol, but collective feminist movements were still considered with suspicion in fin-de-siècle film.

<8> The last two chapters comprise Part III, and investigate the New Woman Criminal in dynamite narratives, late-century works that feature terrorist plots, which are usually the work of organized revolutionaries agitating for political or social change. Chapter 4 looks at Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907) and Henry James' *The Princess Casamassima* (1886) in this context. Gender difference is central to these works because "male characters are tragically relegated to positions of 'feminine' submission" while "the female characters are subversively criminal, modeling the peculiarly feminine and necessarily consumerist means by which agency is enacted in modern society" (151). The men's failed terrorist attempts in these two works suggest the impotence of individual agency and call into question the state of fin-de-siècle masculinity. The greatest threat to modern masculinity, these novels suggest, is the consumer power so readily manipulated by the New Woman Criminal.

<9> The female revolutionaries of Oscar Wilde's play *Vera; or the Nihilists* (1880), Isabel Meredith's *A Girl among the Anarchists* (1903), and Robert Louis and Fanny Stevenson's novel *The Dynamiter* (1885) are the subject of the final chapter. Pointing out that women's participation in political crime necessarily figures the criminal woman as a political force, Miller examines how New Woman Criminals took on new political significance. The representation of female terrorists in these three works suggests that late Victorian culture was struggling to negotiate new conceptions of both criminality and individual political agency. The New Woman Criminal became a useful site for forming these new conceptions because she could "connect 'representation' in its literary and visual sense with 'representation' in its political sense, portraying a political modernity in which the image-centered culture of consumerism is inextricably tied to the possibility of a newly inclusive, newly feminist public sphere" (222).

<10> Miller has crafted an engaging argument in *Framed*, one that makes important critical contributions to the study of late-century crime fiction and illuminates the connections between fin-de-siècle fiction and film. In the process, Miller also lends critical attention to many neglected works, such as L.T. Meade's detective series and arguably all of the dynamite narratives she examines. In addition to contributing new and necessary scholarship on the late-century fictional female criminal, Miller's reading of the New Woman Criminal offers a fresh perspective on how the Victorians conceived of the New Woman and opens up fertile ground for future scholarship in the confluence of late-century gender, crime, and consumerism.