

ENGL 4205 Women & Detective Fiction

To Sherlock Holmes, she was always *the* woman.

—Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, “A Scandal in Bohemia”

At least since Irene Adler beat Sherlock Holmes at his own game, women have had an extensive and complicated relationship with both detectives and detective fiction. Even before Agatha Christie’s Miss Marple first appeared in 1930, they did their share of crime-solving, and Christie is just one of the many women writers prominent in the field in the ‘Golden Age’ of detective fiction in the 1920s and 1930s. Women including Vera Caspary and Dorothy B. Hughes wrote *noir* fiction in the mid-century, often pushing back against the tropes and conventions of their hard-boiled male contemporaries; and P. D. James, Sue Grafton, and Sara Paretsky are only a few of the many women whose crime fiction topped late 20th-century best-seller lists. Many contemporary writers use the form to explore links between individual crises and systemic injustices. In this course we will read a sampling of fiction by women that explores the relationship between gender and crime, sometimes by centering women as investigators, sometimes by interrogating women’s conventional roles in the mystery genre, from victim to *femme fatale*. We will explore the different approaches our readings take to questions about crime, law, justice, morality, knowledge, and power, and about the role class and race play in how these issues are configured and what resolution is imagined as possible or desirable.