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<b>Author</b>	Samantha Walton
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## Madness and Vengeance: Gendered False Consciousness in the Golden Age Crime Novel

Samantha Walton

The University of Edinburgh

In *Castration or Decapitation*, Helene Cixous proposes that:

If man operates under the threat of castration, if masculinity is culturally ordered by the castration complex, it might be said that the backlash, the return, on women of this castration anxiety is its displacement as decapitation, execution, of woman, as loss of her head. (43)

She is writing of a certain Chinese text in which women who laughed at the masculine rules of war were, quite literally, beheaded. More important, however, is the story's metaphorical reflection on the place of 'woman' in a masculine economy: "if they don't actually lose their heads by the sword, they only keep them on condition that they lose them - lose them, that is, to complete silence, turned into automatons" (43). Cixous goes on to look at hysteria, the 'silent' protest which the body – not the voice – expresses. She states: "In the end, the woman pushed to hysteria is the woman who disturbs and is nothing but disturbance." Disturbance may never be enough – "the master dotes on disturbance right from the moment he can subdue it and call it up at his command" (49) – but still it is a model for "resistance to masculine desire conducted by woman," because such resistance cannot be imagined in a masculine voice, but only "as hysteric, as distracted" (50).

Elaine Showalter has objected to what she sees as a tendency in Cixous's writing to reflect on hysteria as a subversive and even empowering 'act' in the confrontation of patriarchy. To Showalter, the self-destructiveness and further loss of autonomy suffered by female hysterics make it practically and ethically untenable as a form of protest: "[...] hysteria was at best a private, ineffectual response to the frustrations of women's lives. Its immediate gratifications – the sympathy of the family, the attention of the physician – were slight in relation to its costs in powerlessness and silence" (161). Taking this dissonance in feminist thought as our starting point, this essay will examine representations of madness in three golden age mystery novels by female authors – Christianna Brand's *Green for Danger* (1945), Gladys Mitchell's *Laurels Are Poison* (1947), and Dorothy L. Sayers' *Gaudy Night* (1935). In this account, 'madness' will not be taken to have a consistent or scientific meaning. While each text is steeped in Freud, only Brand and Mitchell use psychoanalytic terminology to diagnose their murderess's motivations. Madness can signify irrationality, unconventionality, a delusional state of mind or severe emotional imbalance. Taking these various meanings into account, this paper will assess whether madness is used as a potent metaphor for acts of resistance and negation, and whether it costs female characters in powerlessness and silence. Specifically, this paper will consider acts of revenge carried out by each novel's female antagonist because, like madness,

revenge can be considered an empowered, highly insurgent act. While to Showalter madness is always a constrained form of protest, this essay will ask, can the same be said of revenge?

“Revenge,” according to Catherine Belsey, “is always in excess of justice” (113). Writing of the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean revenge tragedy, John Scaggs follows Belsey in suggesting that revenge is presented as a failed attempt to enact justice. Although these dramas are “structured by the overriding imperative of restoring the social order, as embodied in the act of revenge,” it is only “in the absence of justice that the revenger pursues a course of action that is itself unjust” (Scaggs 11). Revenge is an indignant response to a crime usually committed against oneself or one's honour, but by pursuing justice through revenge, the avenger becomes a criminal. Justice is not done, and revenge dramas are more disruptive of the social order than they are restorative.

In the right hands of course, this is no bad thing, which might account for the late twentieth century critical appreciation of female avengers and the popularity of feminist revenge fantasies, in enormously popular films like *Thelma and Louise* (1991)<sup>1</sup> and in novels with obvious feminist commitments, such as those by Faye Wheldon and Angela Carter. The scope of such revenge fantasies to provide moments of resistance has, however, been contested. Uncertain over whether replicating patriarchal cycles of violence could be classed as a feminist revision, Joan Smith has argued that *Thelma and Louise* was “little more than a masculine revenge fantasy, in which the gender of the leading characters has been switched” (qtd. in Read 112). Sally R. Munt and John Kerrigan have both written on revenge in feminist crime novels (published circa 1970) and take differing stances on their subversive potential. Munt notes that violent revenge fantasies are often enjoyed by female readers because they express their desire “to pulverize their oppressors” (203). In contrast, Kerrigan suggests that while such works communicate “righteous rage” (328), revenge fails to empower because it is unable to fully satisfy the avenger. Revenge is futile because it does not achieve what it promised to do, an opinion echoed by scholars of Jacobean drama, Charles and Elaine Hallett, who see revenge as destructive of both the reason and the sense of justice of the avenger: “revenge is a passion that leads to excess and partial madness, thereby condemning the revenger regardless of the virtue of his original motives” (Lindley 176).

Madness, of course, may not be a drawback. The critic Deborah Jermyn echoes Cixous in stating that the figure of the female psychopath in late twentieth century cinema need not be read as a “reactionary representation of single or independent women,” (251). In the empathy generated for the female psychopath, through representation of her social conditions and in explorations of “women's changing roles and 'new' freedoms” (ibid.), Jermyn suggests that it is possible to “recover moments of resistance and disruption” (266). Even in madness, Jermyn suggests, the female avenger remains a figure worth appropriating.

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<sup>1</sup> A non-exhaustive list of comparable titles includes: *Coffy* (1973), *Foxy Brown* (1974), *Carrie* (1976), *Lipstick* (1976), *Ms. 45* (1981), *Extremities* (1986), *Medea* (1987), *The Match Factory Girl* (1990), *Sleeping With The Enemy* (1991), *Kill Bill* (2003/2004), *Lady Vengeance* (2005), *Hard Candy* (2005), *The Brave One* (2007).

In recent years, Alison Light, Gill Plain and Susan Rowland have drawn attention to instances of deviance, subversion and heterodoxy in golden age, female-penned crime novels. While their studies lead the way for a revaluation of these writers and their works, it is not the main purpose of this article to discover disruptive contents in the novels under consideration. Instead, it will look at the ways in which revenge is treated as a tactic of the disempowered, but one that is ultimately constrained by the mental derangement of the female avengers. This is not to assert that these novels are necessarily conservative, or lack other subversive agendas. To recognise that these novels see only limited potential in madness and revenge as forms of protest is not to suggest that they recommend no forms of protest whatsoever, or that they are not critical of social conditions. In fact, these novels are not only critical of social conditions; they ask of their character, why do you not resist? In 1893, Friedrich Engels was exploring an analogous critical impasse, which he accounted for as an effect of ideology:

Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker. Consciously, it is true, but with a false consciousness. The real motive forces impelling him remain unknown to him; otherwise it simply would not be an ideological process. Hence he imagines false or apparent motives. ('Letter to Mehring, 1893')

Individuals *do* ideology to themselves, Engels suggests, in rationalising and naturalising real material inequalities. They see the forces that motivate them as natural and reasonable, and do not realise they are thus contributing to the replication of social organisation and the material inequalities upon which it is founded. Their consciousness, their nature, is not their own.

The relations between the patriarchy and capital accumulation – and between the conditions under which each order reproduces itself – are definitely too contested and no doubt too complex to get into here. The reason this analogy is drawn is that while *Green for Danger*, *Laurels are Poison* and *Gaudy Night* address issues of class and capital with varying degrees of apathy, patriarchy is recognisable as the complete and fundamental structure of each fictive universe. As in some Marxist strains of thought, the feminisms expressed in these books involve belief in a real or more natural human nature (comparable with Marxian species-being) which is not fulfilled under self-perpetuating conditions of domination.

If patriarchal false consciousness typifies the protagonists before their madness, then madness may go some way towards a kind of ideology critique. Each has recognised that something is wrong: that her situation is intolerable, that commonplace explanations for it are inadmissible, and that she has been the dupe of someone or something. However, neither madness nor revenge is allowed to count as a full revolutionary act in these texts. Madness is not treated as a metaphor for a visionary, critical consciousness, but as another process causing the “so-called thinker” (Engels) to misunderstand the motives that move them, and fail to recognise their source. It is because these characters are mad that they do not recognise the wrongs committed against them as instruments of patriarchal social organisation. Instead of attacking the organising system, they lash out against the most accessible targets of vengeance (who are, ironically, often in a vulnerable and persecuted

position themselves). Their righteous rage is converted into counter-productive spite, and their protest recuperated in a way that masks and collaborates with dominant forms of power.

### Green for Danger

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The heroine of Brand's WWII murder mystery is nurse Esther, who takes revenge on the rescue squad that gave up the search for her mother after their home was destroyed during an air raid. Although Esther was desperate to keep digging, the ARP warden heading the rescue decided it was hopeless and too dangerous. However, two days after the raid, a demolition squad found her mother alive in the wreckage: she only lived long enough to give Esther a haunting look of "reproach" (25). Consciously Esther reasons that murdering the rescue squad, now patients in her hospital, is a form of 'natural justice', but Brand's male detective diagnoses Esther's desire to avenge her mother as a means to acquit herself of repressed guilt. This is because Esther disobeyed her mother by getting a nursing job, and later has cause to regret that she was at work and unable to help her mother when the air raid began. The subsequent pathological self-reproach she feels over the tragic consequences of her choice is informed by the traditional female, passive role enforced by her mother: she should not have been at work at all.

Following Cixous, who notes that a woman's "trajectory is from bed to bed" (43), Freudian readings of Esther's 'repression' as sexual hysteria are readily available in the text. Brand's portrayal of Esther's relation with her mother shares the form of one of Freud's most problematic works on feminine sexuality, and encourages a diagnosis of Esther's problem as an inability to detach from her mother as primary sexual object and fulfil 'normal' female sexuality.<sup>2</sup> As such, her bid for career independence can be seen as merely an attempt to get out of the house and find a man. In Munt's reading of *Green for Danger*, however, Esther's home life is not the construction of mother-blame but part of a campaign of "textual claustrophobia" drawing attention "to the more material social and psychological position of women, caught on many sides by expectations they cannot fulfil" (Munt 15). The hospital, to which Esther hopes to escape, is not a place of sexual liberation but merely another site of exploitation and powerlessness, where the pressures of sexual conformity and the gendered hierarchy between male doctors and female nurses dominate. That it is Esther, the "virgin, the feminine ideal, the pure and lovely" (Munt 15) who is insane, to Munt, contributes to an attack on the sexual economy and women's place within it.

Esther is drawn as a highly sympathetic character yet there is little indication that readers are expected to enjoy the demise of her victims. The primary victim, Higgins, is a harmless, elderly postman turned air raid volunteer, whose decision to halt Esther's mother's rescue was "perfectly right, [...] he couldn't sacrifice his men for a hopeless cause" (250). Esther's vengeance on him is excessively unjust, and her murder of an innocent female witness even more so. What differentiates this from a feminist revenge fantasy is that because Esther had misread her motivations, she has misdirected her rage. Esther is not avenging her mother, but neither is her madness caused by repressed guilt over her mother's death. Esther is guilty because she made a bid for liberation, because

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. 'A Case of Paranoia Running Counter to the Psycho-Analytic Theory of the Disease' (1916).

she recognised her life at home as enforced and unjust passivity. Her madness is the symptom of her inability to forgive herself for demanding a career, and its consequence is that she is no longer able to recognise the injustices of her life in a wider sense as a consequence of her gender. Her revenge, then, is not really on Higgins for letting her mother die, but for having the power to decide what is for the best. It is, therefore, a delayed reaction to Esther's wider powerlessness. Her trauma, after all, was also *the* trauma of the WWII woman – that of witnessing carnage, but not being permitted to act. She claimed the right to protest, for the first time, and has come to the conclusion that a man's decision was not for the best.

Instead of pursuing an independent life, however, Esther becomes fixated on revenge and trapped in self-destructive madness. The novel's resolution stresses this sense of misunderstanding and misdirected energy: Esther has killed herself, and her friend, Jane Woods, makes a bid for the love of a hospital lothario, only to have him unknowingly, but patronisingly, put her in her place: “Life isn't very good to you, always, and yet you never show that you're disappointed. You stick out your old chin and make a little joke, and nobody would know there was anything wrong at all” (256). Like Esther, Jane has her role and her value preordained, even though it is in conflict with her character and her desires. Her suffering is ignored, just as was Esther; she “was vague and nervy and always crying” (249). *Green for Danger* closes on this sense of hopelessness, seeming to suggest that there are potentially explosive women all around. If they one day snap, it will not be a sudden thing but the outcome of innumerable instances when they have fought against a more compelling desire in order to fulfil an unjust expectation, like Woods who “stuck out her chin and made a little joke, and nobody knew there was anything wrong” (256). Esther's protest has achieved nothing.

### **Laurels are Poison**

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The female avenger of *Laurels are Poison* is Miss Murchan, a ladies' school teacher who has faked her own death in order to terrorise her younger half-sister, Miss Tree, unsuspected. Years previously, they had each fallen in love with the same man, and Tree had given birth to a child. As their mother explains: “The father of the child was by way of being engaged to the elder one, Blanche [Murchan], you see, and then, when Doris [Tree] bore the child – !” (158). A feud began between the half-sisters, and Murchan's mental health deteriorated until years later she murdered the child. At the novel's opening, Tree is working at the college under an alias. The death of Murchan is being investigated, but unbeknownst to all, Murchan is still alive and is hiding in the college. A number of violent and spiteful attacks on boarders will later be attributed to her, but her primary objective is to attempt an attack on her sister.

The novel's central female relationship, which is also a partly familial relationship, is clearly pathological. The source of this pathology is traced by the detective Mrs Bradley to their mother, who gave birth to them by two separate (now dead) fathers. Rather than being a centripetal force in their lives, their mother hushed up their existence from her third husband, and though she adopted Tree's

illegitimate child in order to avoid scandal, she is adamant that she could not have either of her promiscuous daughters living in her house. The sisters, in turn, are always on the point of destroying one another, but the real victim of their hatred was Tree's innocent child, a daughter, whom Murchan murdered. Little mention is made of their long-gone lover, and certainly no revenge is mooted towards him. Although he catalyses a maelstrom of female hatred, he is not present to witness it: of him, Bradley states, "What happened to him I don't know" (235). In 1929, Virginia Woolf exhorted women to "think back through our mothers" (72-3), but in *Laurels are Poison*, the female line caves in and destroys itself in the absence of men.

With the representative of the younger generation destroyed the sisters become merely retrogressive, enacting mutual revenge over an entirely absent object. The senselessness of the campaign is emphasised in the collapsed mental state of Murchan, the chief aggressor. Instead of functioning as an empowering negation of her intolerable position – being abandoned by her unfaithful fiancé at a time in which women were in 'surplus', and when so much was still staked upon marriage – madness is both a facet of and a cause of her misdirected anger. Tree was left in no better position – pregnant and unmarried, she was forced to let their mother adopt her child. Yet the sisters have not united against the man who treated them both so badly. As was the case with Esther, madness is not merely a reaction to disempowerment, but a disability that stops Murchan from seeing the situation critically, and causes her to mistake an equal sufferer as an aggressor. It is gendered false consciousness, with revenge as its futile praxis.

### **Gaudy Night**

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Set in Shrewsbury, an Oxford women's college, *Gaudy Night* is as much a novel of ideas as one of detection. Philosophical discussions amongst female dons are interwoven with the investigation of a hate campaign against female scholars conducted from within the college. Manuscripts are destroyed, the library is ransacked, gowns are burnt in the quad and the effigy of a female don is found hanging in the chapel. The conclusion that most characters come to is a female scholar has been driven to a conflation of hysteria and neurasthenia through excessive mental labour and the absence of men (chastity being a condition of college life at the time of writing). In choosing to live as they do, the scholars are already in conflict with public opinion, and Sayers' heroine Harriet Vane predicts at once what will be the response of the tabloid press if the misbehaviour in the college becomes public knowledge: "'Soured virginity' – 'unnatural life' – 'semi-demented spinsters' – 'starved appetites and suppressed impulses' – 'unwholesome atmosphere' – she could think of whole sets of epithets, ready-minted for circulation" (74). By confronting and dismantling these prejudices, Sayers presents an impassioned defence of female education. In spite of the disturbances, the college becomes Harriet's sanctuary, and it is through being reconnected with her learning that she regains the self-respect and independence she lost during the intervening years, during which time she suffered considerable trauma. She explains that, before coming back to Oxford, she had "a bad inferiority complex" (31), but since then she says, "I have found a value for myself" (437).

In marked contrast to the emotional fulfilment and intellectual freedom Harriet finds at Shrewsbury are the attacks, which are recognised as an assault upon the ideal of the female higher education itself. It is not surprising, then, that the antagonist of *Gaudy Night* is not a female don, driven mad by repressed sexual urges. Instead a servant, Annie, is to blame. She is the widow of a former scholar who killed himself when his falsification of documents was discovered and made public by a female colleague, Miss de Vine. Annie blames de Vine for the academic and financial downfall of her husband, making her revenge acutely personal; it is, however, also inflamed by her staunch disapproval of female education *per se*. When her guilt is discovered, Annie launches into a lengthy declamation packed with expletives and personal insults and voicing all of the most poisonous prejudices available about education and careers for women: “A woman's job is to look after her husband and children” she states; “No wonder you can't get men for yourselves and hate the women who can”; “I wish I could burn down this place and all the places like it – where you teach women to take men's jobs” (426-427).

Annie can be seen to fall into the same pattern as Esther and Murchan in that she has misunderstood the crimes against her and misdirected her revenge, but she has in fact voiced a damning complaint in her tirade. This does not concern the 'proper' role of women in the family, but the unseen injustices taking place beyond the purview of the scholarly ideal. She states: ““He told a lie about somebody else who was dead and dust hundreds of years ago. Nobody was the worse for that. Was a dirty bit of paper worth more than all our lives and happiness?” (426). The question of whether the life of a family should be worth more than maintaining the integrity of an intellectual discourse is thorny and emotive. To admit that Annie's husband's forgery should have been dealt with less severely would be to admit corruption, entailing its own consequent injustices. However, to turn a blind eye to the suffering caused by a pedantic (in original meaning of the word) correction in a highly specialist field, “a dirty bit of paper,” admits callousness. It amounts to a demand that female scholars, now able to pursue “learning for its own sake” (31), address the question of whether such learning is transcendental, and if not, what are its material foundations and accompanying social structures? This is a question which parallels “a Marxist understanding of Athenian civilisation, which recognises the positive nature of its use of rational dialogue and speculation but also understands them as the fruits of slave society” (Watson 11). Annie's criticism of the ivory tower she perceives in the university system is more thoroughly connected to the systemic injustice of class in her attack upon (Lord Peter) Wimsey:

What do you know about life with your money and your clothes and your motor-cars?  
You've never done a hand's turn of honest work. You can buy all the women you want.  
Wives and mothers may rot and die for all you care, while you chatter about duty and honour. (428)

Annie recognises the collaboration between patriarchy and class privilege and blames the scholars for forgetting that intellectual work cannot exist independently of manual labour. She is quite right to do so. Harriet herself has reflected on scholarship as “a Holy War” with all the scholars “fused into a



corporate unity” with everyone “to whom integrity of mind meant more than material gain [...] How could one feel fettered, being the freeman of so great a city, or humiliated, where all enjoyed equal citizenship?” (31). All, of course, do not enjoy equal citizenship, especially not the college's domestic workforce. Annie's nemesis, the aptly named 'deVine', may share the illusion that they are operating in an ideal city, whose “foundations were set upon the holy hills” and whose “spires touched heaven,” (31) but the college has real, material foundations in the actual labour of those who are excluded from the intellectual ideal in order to keep the college operational.

According to Annie, it is the scholars' intellectual insularity that makes them incapable of responding adequately to her complaints. She states, “There's nothing in your books about life and marriage and children, is there? Nothing about desperate people – or love - or hate or anything human. You're ignorant and stupid and helpless.” (427). Their neglect of the familial and emotional aspects of life amounts to a theoretical ellipsis, and indeed, the scholars are made helpless by her assault: “They looked stupefied with the shock of seeing so many feelings stripped naked in public” (429). Stupefaction is an appropriate term, suggesting a parallel with Agamben's comments upon scholarship: “those who study are in the situation of people who have received a shock and are stupefied by what has struck them, unable to grasp it and at the same time powerless to leave hold. The scholar, that is, is always 'stupid’” (64). Rather than the revelation opening a new path of thought, it is blocked because there is no way in which it can be assimilated within their rational system as it stands. Annie's protest is merely endured, and it is not until she collapses in tears that they are roused to answer her:

She suddenly burst out crying – half dreadful and half grotesque, with her cap crooked and her hands twisting her apron into a knot.

'For Heaven's sake,' muttered the Dean, 'can't this be stopped?'

Here Miss Barton got up.

'Come, Annie.' she said, briskly. 'We are all very sorry for you, but you mustn't behave in this foolish and hysterical way. What would the children think if they saw you now?' (429)

Miss Barton's intervention suggests an answer to Annie. Although Barton is a scholar, she is not occupied with ancient history or abstract philosophy, but is writing an attack upon the Nazi social doctrine of *Kinder, Kirche, Küche* – children, kitchen, church – and the implication of traditional female roles in patriarchy and fascism. That *Gaudy Night* was published in 1935, in the context of rising Continental Fascism, attests to the urgency and relevance of Barton's scholarship. What it also stresses is that the personal is absolutely the political. That it is Barton who is capable of responding to Annie signifies that emotion, private suffering and personal values are both real and valid objects of study. An intellectual system unable to cope with them exposes itself, and its adherents, as inadequate and dangerously detached.

Annie's complaints are therefore vindicated to an extent, but there is no way they can be fully supported if all the novel has worked for is to stand. The academic integrity of de Vine must be defended no matter what: anything less would compromise the university, in both its real and ideal form, as well as Harriet's hard-won independence. Annie's madness, and the fact that she has taken revenge, becomes the means through which her containment is effortlessly achieved. While it should be remembered that she is not mad in the sense that has preoccupied *Gaudy Night* – sexual hysteria – she is a representative of unreason. Her speech closes on hysteria, aptly bookending a sequence which began with her unmasking:

Neat and subdued as usual, she approached the Warden:

'Padget said you wished to see me, madam.' Then her eye fell on the newspaper spread out upon the table, and she drew in her breath with a long, sharp hiss, while her eyes went round the room like the eyes of a hunted animal. (425)

Bestial and demonic, Annie's true character is made all the more frightening by the shift from compliant servant to furious retaliator. The sudden, estranging effect is characteristic of golden age mystery denouements, where the uncanny nature of the shift reveals the “incivility” and “imperfect socialisation” hidden by characters' roles and “indicates a dangerous fragility in the social nexus” (Burns and Burns 129). At this moment she is atavistic, embodying everything the educated woman is not, and will no longer be: illogical, selfish, docile, short-sighted, credulous and easily provoked. That Annie turns against the female scholars who are at the vanguard of improving opportunities for women, and who have given her a job, rather than, say, the husband who risked his family's welfare in pursuit of career advancement, the patriarchal institutions which produced her as a dependent of her husband, or even the state's lack of adequate social welfare to support her family, attests to an absence of critical thought. In her case, madness is not the companion to revenge, but stupidity, a more threatening form of irrationality than even the thematic unbalance of the female intellectual. What we in fact see in Annie is the recuperation of a protest against material and social conditions, agreeable to the perpetuation of those conditions because it is enacted as revenge against her equals within patriarchy – women – but also against her socio-economic oppressors. There is a lack of communication between feminism and class protest which the novel cannot, nor tries to, resolve.

In each of these novels, a female protagonist finds herself disempowered in a way that is directly related to her social position. In each case, the protagonists fixate upon that situation, leading to madness and to the execution of a vengeful act. Not only is this retaliation retrogressive, in that it does not move towards a future in which such disempowering situations will no longer occur, but it is also insane in the broadest sense of the term – unreasonable, excessive and unjustified – a mere indictment against social conditions without constructive content. Furthermore, because the 'wrongs' committed against the female avengers are not actionable – none of them are crimes, by any means – the avenger's justification is seriously eroded. Retaliation for an isolated wrong is shown to be an insubstantial response to systemic misogyny, returning us to the theoretical dissonance between Cixous and Showalter, between madness and revenge as protest, or as self-destruction, at which this

essay began. Although a “righteous rage” (Kerrigan 328) motivates each of Sayers', Mitchell's and Brand's characters initially, revenge becomes the recuperation of resistance against gendered false consciousness, with insane avengers – whom the dominant form of power is well equipped to punish – entering themselves as the final item on the list of scapegoats.

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