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© Screenplay from *Killing Eve* (2018-)

CONSORTING WITH CRIMINALITY: THE FEMALE DETECTIVE IN *KILLING EVE*

by: E. Deidre Pribram , June 14, 2021

Introduction

Killing Eve (BBC America, 2018-present) tells the story of protagonist and chief crime investigator, Eve Polastri (Sandra Oh), on the hunt for consummate assassin-for-hire, Villanelle (Jodi Comer). On one level, the television serial follows a formulaic pattern in the detection genre, in which the hero-protagonist spends her time hunting down the villainous antagonist. On another level, the narrative seemingly departs from the traditional formula in that, over the course of her pursuit, Eve develops a growing attraction for Villanelle, an attraction that is reciprocated. Although ostensibly on opposite sides of the law, *Killing Eve's* distinct narrative signature depicts Eve's increasing fascination for, even obsession with, her criminal counterpart.

Not only do the two characters become absorbed in a mutual attraction; the audience, too, feels fascination for the glamorously cruel Villanelle. Her meticulously staged kills, in which she takes great pleasure, for instance, insisting that victims look her in the eye as they die, are depicted in prolonged detail for viewers, emphasising rather than minimising the efficient brutality of her criminal acts. What, then, are we to make of Eve and Villanelle's reciprocated attraction? By rights, Eve ought to feel repelled by and outraged at Villanelle, especially once the latter kills Eve's former boss and close friend, Bill (David Haig) in Season One, Episode 3, raising the dramatic stakes and rendering Eve's pursuit of Villanelle all the more 'personal.' Eve's captivation with Villanelle transpires as simultaneously intriguing, perplexing, and disturbing. Why is our lead detective so drawn to her criminal opposite; is she, in turn, as deeply unbalanced a character as the villain she seeks?

Killing Eve can be considered one of several recent British/Irish TV serials, including *Luther* (BBC, 2010-2019) and *The Fall* (BBC 2013-2016), in which the lead detective becomes enamoured with a psychopathic yet charismatic killer.

[1]

In *Luther*, male police detective John Luther (Idris Elba) develops a deep connection with the compelling female multiple murderer, Alice Morgan (Ruth Wilson). In *The Fall*, it is female detective, Stella Gibson (Gillian Anderson), who is mesmerised by

disturbing male serial killer, Paul Spector (Jamie Dornan). While *Killing Eve* shares commonality with these other TV series in its central dynamic of attraction between detective and criminal, it remains distinct from them in that both lead investigator and chief criminal are women. I turn to the example of *Killing Eve* to explore the dynamic of attraction between detective and offender, specifically as it applies to two female characters, in order to discover what it reveals about the gendered status of the female detective.

The Subversive Female Detective

Considered a development of the nineteenth century, modern detective fiction is regarded as initiated by Edgar Allan Poe in three stories featuring French amateur detective, Auguste Dupin. (Messent 2013: 4; Scaggs 2005: 7; Shiloh 2007: 183) [2]

In England, that development was further solidified and finds its 'enormous popular currency' with Arthur Conan Doyle's series of works focusing on consulting detective, Sherlock Holmes, beginning in 1887 with 'A Study in Scarlet'. (Messent 2013: 4)

Whether principal characters are law enforcement officials, private investigators, or brilliant amateur sleuths, the exceptionality of much detective fictions rests, in Poe's phrase, in that these are 'tales of ratiocination,' playing out the processes, power, and triumph of logical deduction taken to the extreme of 'radical rationality'. (Poe quoted in Scaggs: 21; Shiloh: 184)

Hendrey-Seabrook points out that female detectives began appearing in significant numbers by the 1890s, drawn by both female and male authors. (2014: 226) Female-authored versions of 'Sherlock's sisters' include Loveday Brooke (from 1893), the inspiration of Briton Catherine Louisa Pirkis, writing as C.L. Pirkis. (Hendrey-Seabrook 2014: 232 & 228) Another prominent instance is American Anna Katharine Green who wrote her first detective novel, the bestseller *The Leavenworth Case*, in 1878 and then went on to create female sleuths, Amelia Butterworth (from 1897) and Violet Strange (1915). (Gates 2011: 17-18) The Butterworth character, in particular, is considered to have had a major impact on Agatha Christie's Miss Marple (from 1927).

Hendrey-Seabrook's contention is that although Victorian and Edwardian 'lady detectives' were far from absent, their presence *as women* was inherently subversive to the genre in ways that invariably raised issues around their gender. (2014: 240) Drawn largely from the middle or upper classes, early fictional female detectives purposefully leave 'the safety of the domestic environment and willingly take up the exposed position of active investigator ... on behalf of the public'. (2014: 237) Early female detectives inherently subvert contemporaneous, class-affiliated, gender norms for several reasons. First, they take up positions in public rather than domestic environments, which necessitate going to social locations and pursuing various worldly activities that might otherwise be deemed inappropriate. Second, such female sleuths adopt a professional occupation as 'active investigator,' even when they maintained amateur statu—although a number were income-earning businesswomen, often out of necessity.

Third, and most significant here, by its very definition the detective genre mandates association with 'criminal elements.' Hendrey-Seabrook maintains that male detectives like Sherlock Holmes 'remained heir to the trope of the socially marginalised loner and this gave his construction an edgy, criminal-like thrill of its own as he rubbed shoulders with those he tried to capture'. (2014: 225-226) Part of the lure of early (and subsequent) detective fiction can be attributed to it not only necessitating, but revelling in, male detectives' immersion in the life of criminals and criminality, rendering the stories thrilling, edgy, and fashionably rebellious. One of the attractions of the newly developing detective stories, then, was to offer up a subliminally desired, or even outwardly admired, socially transgressive quality as male detectives consorted with the criminal classes. The air of excitement provided by the immersion of otherwise respectable loner-gentlemen in illicit worlds accounts for the connective web of character traits that link Holmes to Moriarity, for example, while Shiloh observes that Monsieur Dupin and the villain Minister D. function as 'each other's double' in Poe's 'The Purloined Letter'. (185) From early on, detective fiction took shape as a narrative world in which the detective and his criminal counterpart shared similar codes of conduct, understanding their complementary status to such an extent that they 'doubled' each other. In contrast, early female detectives, by virtue of their gender, were forced to disavow or somehow work to overcome 'the transgressive influences of the criminal world'. (Hendrey-Seabrook 2014: 236)

Day-Mayer and Mayer describe the villains of nineteenth-century theatrical and early-twentieth-century cinematic melodrama as ‘the engine’ or ‘propelling force’ that drove the stories. (2018: 103) The ‘normal,’ ordered world might be a stable, comfortable place but those qualities also rendered it banal and unexciting. It is the villain who intrudes upon and threatens the stable world, making the dramatic disruption possible in the first place, and explaining why the villain so often became the most compelling character. In a similar manner, it is the criminal-as-villain who propels the detective story, threatening the equilibrium of a law-abiding world while, at the same time, upending its banal complacency.

I take the notion of the transgressive quality attached to consorting with criminals, evident in *Luther* and *The Fall* but reserved for male detectives in the early days of the genre, and apply it to the contemporary television serial, *Killing Eve*. For Eve fails to distance herself from, or otherwise disavow Villanelle’s criminality. Quite the contrary, Eve actively pursues, and revels in, that connection to criminality, immersing herself in the pleasures and excitement that she finds lacking in her comfortable, but banal and complacent existence.

Produced by BBC America, *Killing Eve* was first released in the United States, one of a number of prominent, respected TV serials to revitalize that format since the turn into the twenty-first century. (Creeber 2004; Kelleter 2017; Mittell 2015; O’Sullivan 2010; Williams 2018) I focus specifically on Season One of *Killing Eve* when Phoebe Waller-Bridge (*Fleabag*, *Run*) served as showrunner and headwriter.

[3]

Killing Eve’s narrative technique relies upon a tightly crafted, rapidly shifting, quirky tone. Veering from horrific acts of violence to moments of disarming humour, the serial captures a tonal quality that alternates between, and ultimately combines, excitement with mundanity. Its ever-shifting, quirky tonality hinges upon a razor-thin edge of tonal appropriateness, in which success depends on avoiding either excessiveness or false notes. I find Season One to be particularly adept at this tonal balancing act. Additionally, the first season deploys the interchange between excitement and mundanity in ways that are central to the serial’s elaboration of women’s circumstances.

[4]

The two lead characters in *Killing Eve* develop a strong, complex professional, erotic, and romantic relationship. Without seeking to minimize the importance of their erotic and romantic relationship—an analysis which awaits undertaking—I focus on the professional portion of their relationship. Their professional interactions entail their respective roles as detective and criminal, hero and villain. Given the specific ways their professional identities are taken up in this contemporary series, I explore what the implications might be for the detective genre and the possibilities for female detectives within that trajectory.

Eve's pursuit of Villanelle becomes the means to question the parameters of her own mundane existence as a middle-class, professional woman. Although the pair shares in common keen intelligence and an aversion to following rules or obeying authority figures, as Eve develops an obsessive fascination for her ostensible nemesis, everything about Villanelle becomes a source for comparison. Villanelle's 'career' is the more glamorous, offering up global excitement and risk. She travels from Vienna and Paris to Tuscany and London in order to carry out her professional activities as an assassin—all in a single episode (Season One, Episode 1). In contrast, in the same episode, an entire scene takes place in which Eve stands silently, thinking, while heating up a drink in the microwave. The only 'action' occurs when the microwave beeps to signal completion. Eve trudges away at her desk job as an MI5 administrator, all-the-while longing to be an agent in the field, a proper 'spy'.

The assassin conducts an independent, capricious existence as a single person while the government bureaucrat returns to a predictable, complacent home life with her husband, Niko (Owen McDonnell). When Eve grumbles to her boss, Bill, about the tedium of her life, he responds that the nature of their job is boring, then continues: 'I'm sorry if your husband is boring you, too, but that doesn't give you an excuse to go rogue at work' (Episode 1), pinpointing Eve's problem in the overarching mundanity of her existence. The multilingual Villanelle *moves*, circulating effortlessly among various national landscapes as if she is native to them all, seemingly at home in whatever global context she finds herself. Meanwhile, Eve's life in London, although not entirely static, displays limited mobility. Especially early in the series, Eve alternates within a constrained landscape consisting primarily of her work-home circuit. Even meetings with her new MI6 boss occur locally, at the butcher's or in the corner shop buying milk, rather than taking advantage of London as an international

city. Eve only ventures outside the boundaries within which she is supposed to exist when, as Bill indicates, she goes 'rogue.' In opposition to Villanelle who seems at home everywhere, Eve remains an outsider in London. As Asian-American, she exists at a remove in the place she calls home by virtue of both her nationality and race.

Beyond setting, other elements of *mise-en-scène*, such as wardrobe, play a pivotal role in depicting the contrasts in the two women's lives. Villanelle indulges in luxurious fabrics, such as silk bed throws, and playful, spontaneous fashions in bright colours, bold patterns, and stylish designs. Eve wears a drab, practical wardrobe, consisting of serviceable clothing in shades of beige, brown, and grey, better suiting her personality and state of existence. Villanelle is the more compelling character serving, as Day-Mayer and Mayer point out, as the villain who rivets our attention when on screen. She is an assassin with 'flair' as Eve describes her (Episode 2), while Eve fulfils her protagonist role in a reliable, but plodding manner. Eve's existence is functional while Villanelle manages to incorporate the fanciful and fun into her reality. Indeed, in Episode 4 of Season One, Villanelle makes this very point by stealing Eve's suitcase and replacing its contents with gifts of upscale designer fashions. Eve describes the gifted wardrobe as consisting of: 'Expensive clothes. Amazing clothes. All my size'. (Episode 4) Villanelle has adeptly chosen outfits that showcase Eve to advantage. Eve finds their sophisticated quality, like that of their bestower, difficult to resist.

Like any effective villain, it is Villanelle who creates the narrative's dramatic events, providing Eve with the chance to become a field agent and, in that process, changing Eve's life. Eve is set up to run an MI6 covert unit whose mission is, precisely, to track down Villanelle. In narrative terms, Villanelle enables Eve to become what she most wants: a working spy with all its attendant excitement, risk, and danger. And it is Villanelle who offers Eve a vision of the life she wishes to lead, something much more closely approximating Villanelle's own existence. In setting up these dramatic contrasts, the serial poses the problem, what exactly is wrong with Eve's life, and right with Villanelle's? In that process, the program offers up a meditation on what a satisfying, fulfilling, or even exciting life might mean for a twenty-first-century professional woman.

The Meeting of Excitement and Mundanity

The interchange between excitement and mundanity permeates the series. The swing between domestic minutiae and sensational deeds is exemplified when Villanelle opens a drawer in her Paris apartment to reveal, in close-up, tampons nestled next to a handgun. (Episode 1) Abrupt shifts in tonal register take place for both of the lead characters, as the series veers from the smallest, most trivial details of daily life to the suspense and violence of a cat-and-mouse thriller. The possibility of losing oneself in the tedium of the ordinary remains an ever-present threat in both women's lives, for instance, Villanelle often complains that people are 'boring' her. However, the threat dominates Eve's constrained existence, especially early in the serial. In juxtaposition, Villanelle more often serves as an exercise in how to surmount the problem plaguing Eve, posing as the potential solution or, at any rate, an appealing alternative.

Like the handgun and the tampons, at any moment the exciting might be nestled next to the mundane. The potential for one end of the tonal pendulum to either conceal or turn into the other is embedded in every event. We first see Villanelle in a Viennese ice cream parlour exchanging smiles with a young girl at a nearby table, as they each enjoy their sundaes. When Villanelle gets up to leave, still smiling, she upends the ice cream into the little girl's lap, the affable ordinary so abruptly transformed that it is shocking. In contrast, at the inverse end of the tonal pendulum swing, Eve is first introduced in bed, screaming as though terrorised, only to offer the most quotidian explanation, 'I fell asleep on both my arms,' which she describes as 'scary.' Late in Episode 1, Eve and Villanelle accidentally meet in a hospital ladies room, each one's identity unbeknownst to the other but clear to the audience. Their first encounter is a narratively momentous occasion but, in understated guise, consists of a seemingly trivial exchange between the two, in which Villanelle, disguised as a nurse, suggests Eve wear her long hair down instead of pinning it up in her usual manner. Then, in another abrupt shift in tonal register, Villanelle exits the ladies room to brutally murder four people, one of whom is the witness Eve is meant to have under guard in order to ensure her safety.

The inverse to the excitement offered up by Villanelle is Niko, Eve's husband. Like Eve's wardrobe, he is a perfectly serviceable spouse, his considerateness evinced by cooking her meals and generally providing support. Thus, he serves as opposition to the attraction or pull afforded by Villanelle. However, the crucial exception to Niko's backing of Eve lies in his objections to her newfound career as an MI6 operative. As

murders surface around Eve, Niko becomes understandably frightened about her new position and deeply concerned for her, and their, safety. As a result, her work turns into a source of increasing tension between the couple. Eve often responds to Niko's growing concerns, and the turbulence in their relationship, with feelings of guilt and a sense of what is expected of her more than from passion for her spouse or for their marriage. After all, she could quit her new job if, as she claims to Niko at one point, 'I want you to know, darling, you are the most important thing in the world to me'. (Episode 7) Yet, throughout Season One, Eve has no intention of leaving her long-wished-for position as an MI6 agent or ending her mission in pursuit of Villanelle.

Over the course of Season One, the two women meet face-to-face on only a handful of occasions. Most of their overlapping—indeed, mutual—story is conveyed through parallel action. Thus, although the two encounter each other accidentally in the hospital ladies room late in Episode 1, they only come to realize who the other person actually was in the finale to Episode 2. Having been informed by her handler, Konstantin (Kim Bodnia), that a special unit of MI6 headed by a woman named Eve Polastri has been mounted expressly to track her down, Villanelle lies on her bed, looking up 'Eve Polastri' on her laptop. Linked musically by 'La Marseillaise' playing across both locations, we cut to Eve's office as she searches through all the pictures of nurses employed by the hospital where her charge was murdered, looking for the specific nurse she encountered in the ladies room—a potential witness to the events. A short scene back to Villanelle who has located an Eve Polastri—an elderly woman. In her office, Eve cannot find the nurse she is looking for. Villanelle finds an image of the correct Eve and, startled, recognises her as the woman she encountered in the restroom. A brief flashback occurs of Eve and Villanelle exchanging a few words in the ladies room. The flashback further links the two characters because it initiates as Villanelle's memory but concludes as Eve's recollection, creating a shared visualization between the two. Eve realises the woman she encountered is not actually a nurse at the hospital but the assassin she seeks. Turning to Bill, Eve states: 'I think I've met her,' smiles, and the episode ends.

Their mutual realization is accomplished simultaneously, through cross-cutting. Such parallel action enables the two women's lives to seem far more interlocked than their irregular face-to-face meetings would allow. Recurrent parallel action enables Eve and Villanelle to operate as if they exist in a narratively insular world only the two of

them inhabit, a world based on their special connection but closed to other people. Linked through occasional in-person interactions, considerable parallel action, and their shared preoccupation with each other, the two exist in an insular world of their own creation in which only each one seems fully capable of understanding the other.

In notable opposition to the shared world the women create unto themselves, the two principal male figures—Eve's spouse, Niko, and Villanelle's handler, Konstantin—work to constrain or tame the two female leads, as much as they sustain the women's endeavours. Niko objects to Eve's dangerous, new MI6 position, heading a unit mandated to track down Villanelle, while Konstantin repeatedly reprimands Villanelle for following and making contact with Eve which, he argues, is reckless and unprofessional conduct, endangering their criminal organization. The supporting male characters seek to curtail Eve and Villanelle's activities upon the same basis: the women's relationship with each other. Both women keep secrets from and lie to their male auxiliaries, measuring their success or failure against each other, not to their supporting male cast.

One of their infrequent, in-person encounters occurs when Villanelle breaks into Eve's home in order to have dinner with her in Episode 5. When Villanelle enters the home, she finds Eve wearing the elegant, form-fitting, black and white evening dress that Villanelle has supplied for her in the stolen suitcase, replenished with 'expensive,' 'amazing' clothing. Instead of being revolted by and rejecting the outfits Villanelle has bought for her, Eve takes delight in their quality and how much they suit her. When she puts on the dress, Eve also lets her hair down in the manner Villanelle expressed liking it, during their first encounter in the hospital ladies room. Clearly, Villanelle has come to inhabit Eve's life in pleasurable as much as frightening ways.

During this dinner get-together over shepherd's pie (homemade by Niko), Eve itemises her perceptions of Villanelle. Eve tells her she is 'exceptionally bright. Determined. Hardworking,' a 'psychopath,' and 'an extraordinary person'. (Episode 5) Indeed, to Eve, Villanelle is anything but ordinary. The heart of what ails Eve about her life can be found in the excitement/mundanity dilemma. Her 'fixation' on Villanelle, as it is both described and portrayed in the series, can be located in the possibilities that the assassin's life represents versus the security of Eve's desk job and her merely satisfactory marriage.

However, what Eve feels about Villanelle does not belong to the realm of rationality—the ratiocination with which Eve otherwise sets about identifying and tracking down her nemesis. Eve and Villanelle’s relationship exists alongside or beyond ratiocination: the parameters of radical rationality that have been regarded as the origin and most defining attribute of detection as a distinct genre. Yet, following Hendrey-Seabrook, detectives have long immersed themselves with criminals and in criminal worlds, a development operative since the genre’s founding. The excitement, dangers, rebelliousness, and pleasures of consorting with criminality belong to different realms of existence than ratiocination. Further, the feelings and pleasures associated with criminality have been an equally constitutive part of the detection genre since its onset.

The difficulty for Eve is that she has no reasonable grounds—that is, grounds based in detection’s particular brand of reason as ratiocination—to complain about her existence. Eve garners security and respectability from her professional and personal lives. She also receives comfort, economic and otherwise, from the same sources. To complain about or reject all that she possesses would be unreasonable, by the genre’s standards. And yet, the serial is titled, *Killing Eve*, and not, for instance, *Killing Villanelle*, even though it is Eve who stabs Villanelle at the end of Season One.

[5]

The serial’s title, we can assume, is intended to be read metaphorically, in which the ‘old’ Eve must meet her demise at the hands of the villain, Villanelle, in order to be transformed into someone new, someone who embraces rather than merely tolerates her life.

Killing Eve’s Emotional Landscape

While the excitement versus mundanity dilemma functions as *Killing Eve’s* central thematic, other emotions work to constitute the particular tonal dynamic of the serial. Although apparently incapable of feeling fear, empathy, guilt, or regret, it would be incorrect to regard Villanelle as, therefore, devoid of emotion. She conveys an irrepressible aura of exuberance, spontaneity, and playfulness, which not only permeate her creative fashion sense (and has made the character something of a fashion icon for viewers) but also includes the way she brandishes jokes, both verbal and practical. Equally, Villanelle expresses astonishing cruelty and, undeniably, takes pleasure in the violent acts she carries out, demonstrated to the audience, and Eve,

time and again. Villanelle derives immense satisfaction from strategising and executing her ingenious assassinations, as well as from watching her victims die. Villanelle's playful aspects do not mitigate her viciousness; they co-exist without explanation or apology.

The character, Villanelle, never attempts to explain her behaviour, nor does she apologize for who she is or what she does. Instead, she revels in her peculiar mode of existence, ranging in its manifestations from playful exuberance to vicious cruelty. For instance, Villanelle's frequent jokes function as a way of changing the course of a conversation, while keeping Villanelle firmly in control of it, deftly enabling her to deflect demands for self-explication, for which she has no tolerance or interest.

[6]

While adding humour to the program and contributing to the quirky shifting tone of the serial, her joking demeanour represents more than avoidance of certain topics of conversation on Villanelle's part. They are part of her adamant rejection of the possibility of providing or believing in, rational explanation for her being or her criminality. Villanelle functions as an inexplicable human force, as repellent as she is desirable, an exemplar of the edgy, thrilling criminal forces that have populated detective fiction since its outset.

Arguably to their credit, the creators of the serial neither mitigate nor minimize Villanelle's violent acts or streaks of cruelty.

[7]

Her gruesome murders are displayed fully, without an attempt to render Villanelle more 'acceptable' as her involvement with Eve escalates. Like the character herself, Season One revels in who Villanelle is, while providing minimal explanation or apology.

In contrast, Eve often hides the extent of her admiration and attraction for Villanelle, attempting to either deny it to herself or conceal it from others. This holds true until the season finale when, in intimate detail, Eve spells out the extent of her fixation on Villanelle, just before stabbing her:

I think about you all the time. I think about what you're wearing and what you're doing and who you're doing it with. I think about what friends you have. I think about what you eat before work and what shampoo you use and what happened

to your family. I think about your eyes and your mouth and what you feel when you kill someone. I think about what you have for breakfast. I just want to know everything. (Episode 8)

Eve's desire to consort with Villanelle, despite the horrific murders and other misdeeds the latter carries out, is both the serial's draw and its source of discomfort. By rights, Eve should hate Villanelle, especially after she stabs Bill to death. And indeed, in response to Bill's demise, Eve tells a colleague that she wants to find and kill Villanelle 'with my bare hands'. (Episode 4) And certainly, Eve is terrified of the highly skilled professional assassin, as demonstrated when Villanelle breaks into Eve's home for dinner. Screaming loudly and repeatedly, Villanelle only manages to calm Eve down by dousing her with water in the bathtub. However, outrage, hatred and fear are simply not the sum total of what Eve feels towards Villanelle. Describing the killer as 'impressive' (Episode 1), Eve also admires her and, certainly, finds her compelling, as her own words quoted above make clear.

The narrative offers no easy solutions for the dilemma it poses, nor does it provide escape routes for viewers so that they might disavow the complexities of Eve's fixation on her criminal counterpart, even as the character cannot. For example, we are not led to moral homilies in which, despite Eve's dissatisfactions with her life, we settle for the concession that at least she leads an honest, law-abiding existence. Nor can we take comfort in being offered revelations indicating deeper pleasures in Eve's original existence, beyond its tedium and complacency, but that we initially failed to perceive. These are never offered. Instead, Eve's desire to consort with Villanelle continues in an intense, unwavering manner, bringing her deep pleasures, in addition to anger and fear. And like Eve, we are stuck with her fixation. Her ongoing engagement with Villanelle causes Eve to question, extensively, almost everything about her terms of existence while, at the same time, the narrative puts almost every aspect of Eve's life under painstaking scrutiny for viewers.

Part of the long draw of detective fiction can be attributed to the edginess of its associations with criminality, enabling the thrills of social transgression and a concomitant rebellion against middle-class—and in certain cases, feminine—proprieties. Criminals represent a human force that simultaneously mesmerises and repels, just as criminal-villains have done throughout the course of the detective genre. Existing alongside, but as compelling a factor in the genre's popularity as its

'radical rationality,' an attraction and aversion for seemingly inexplicable human forces (exuberance, cruelty) function as powerful seductions, closely affiliated with the pleasures of criminal existence as imagined in the detection genre.

Popularising Female Detectives

A century following the 1890s, when female detectives first began making their appearance in notable numbers, women investigators grew to be quite commonplace, especially in popular literature and on television. Both Philippa Gates and Linda Mizejewski identify the 1980s and 1990s as a boom time for female detectives in fiction and on TV. (Gates 2011: 9; Mizejewski 2004: 1, 63)

[8]

Mizejewski points to over one hundred book series centred on female crime fighters by the 1990s (1), arguing that in crime fiction and on television, 'the woman investigator was emerging as a character *aimed* at women readers and audiences, a character made possible by the women's movement of the previous decade'. (2004: 63, italics in original)

Similarly, both Sue Turnbull and Mizejewski point to the American series, *Cagney & Lacey* (1981-1988), and the British show, *Prime Suspect* (1991-1996, 2003, 2006), as marking significant advances in the portrayal of television's female investigators. (Turnbull 2014: 154, 167-168 & 175-176; Mizejewski 2004: 72-76 & 79-83) *Cagney & Lacey* and *Prime Suspect* are considered breakthrough series, amongst the numerous other contemporaneous TV series featuring female detectives, because they focus on 'institutional misogyny'. (Turnbull 2014: 175 & 193), in which female detectives are compared to their male counterparts in terms of gendered restrictions in their professional lives and, by extension, in the broader society at large. Thus, *Prime Suspect* 'emphasized the sexism of law enforcement and the bleakness of the woman detective's personal life'. (Mizejewski 2004: 79)

So prolific do female detectives (and female audiences) become that Gates suggests we ought to 'question the "maleness" of the detective genre'. (2011: 38) Hers is an argument worthy of further consideration. The traditional view of women in the detective genre is that they face struggles based on a gender binary between domestic, private life and a professional, public career. That is to say, they are caught in and must choose between the ostensibly bifurcated opposition of femininity versus

masculinity. However, regarding the detection genre as essentially or largely male may itself be an outdated view, akin to the outmoded story structure of certain kinds of mystery tales. Once highly productive, as in the cases of *Cagney & Lacey* and *Prime Suspect*, the masculine-feminine dichotomy has become something of a constraining concept in thinking through the genre and its female investigators. Instead of positioning female detectives in their own right, they are compared to an ever-present, ubiquitous monolith of 'the male detective' who, of course, has himself never been a unified, singular entity. If in many eras, a female detective inherently raised the issue of comparison to masculinity, this no longer need be the case as evidenced by *Killing Eve*.

One of the outcomes of featuring both a female detective hero and a female criminal villain is the removing, or at least the reframing, of a masculine-feminine binary based in gendered comparison. The dual female leads enable the exploration of its women's lives, desires, frustrations, complexities, contradictions, and pleasures within their own formulated narrative world, rather than appraising how they might fit into a masculine world or a masculine genre.

Although comparing and contrasting surfaces as an important feature of *Killing Eve's* mode of storytelling, the source of comparison for the two women resides in *each other*, not to male counterparts. In this particular mode of comparison, Eve's existence is especially found wanting. She is far less successful at incorporating the exciting and the fanciful into her existence, instead, remaining largely mired in mundanity and the merely functional. As the story progresses, Eve attempts to alter this set of circumstances, in keeping with all that she comes to recognize about and through Villanelle. In addition to the global contexts the working assassin comfortably inhabits, and the elegance and playfulness of her wardrobe, Villanelle delights in life's daily pleasures—Viennese ice cream, an antipasto picnic while staking out her Tuscan target, the refrigerator in her Paris apartment stocked entirely and only with bottles of champagne. Villanelle's ability to integrate the fanciful into the functionality of her existence, to feel both pleasure and pain intensely, embodies what seems to be lacking in Eve's life, but which she comes to acknowledge through Villanelle.

As we survey the detective genre from its origins, women detectives need no longer be regarded as rare or unusual, or to be measured against their male counterparts. As in the case of *Killing Eve*, female detectives and female villains may well explore their

own goals, desires, frustrations, and pleasures. Over time, they have come to amass an extensive range of often surprising and exhilarating versions of criminals and investigators in their own, complex right.

Notes

[1]

One could argue that, in contrast to recent British programming, American serials are more preoccupied with *being* a criminal rather than consorting with them. This is the case for now-iconic series such as *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007) or *Breaking Bad* (AMC 2008-2013), as well as other examples like *How to Get Away with Murder* (ABC, 2014-2020) and *Ozark* (Netflix, 2017-2022).

[2]

‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’ (1841); ‘The Mystery of Marie Roget,’ (1842-43); ‘The Purloined Letter’ (1845).

[3]

Killing Eve follows an unusual arrangement in which each season is helmed by a different female showrunner and headwriter. In addition to Phoebe Waller-Bridge who oversaw Season One, the showrunners for Season Two, Three, and the forthcoming Four are, respectively, Emerald Fennell, Suzanne Heathcote, and Laura Neal. Waller-Bridge also wrote four of the eight episodes in Season One (1, 2, 5 & 8).

[4]

My concern with emotional tone is part of a larger project examining how emotionality not only informs, but actively structures, televisual seriality. (Pribram 2022)

[5]

In the finale of Season Two, Villanelle shoots Eve. At the conclusion of Season Three, the two attempt to separate from each other.

[6]

For example, during their dinner together, when Eve asks Villanelle why she has shown up at her home, the latter puts on a tearful performance detailing how she is being forced to work as an assassin, that she doesn't want to hurt people any longer, but needs help escaping from that life. Eve recognises the story for what it is, 'bullshit' (episode 5). The point is that Villanelle delights in making fun of what other people want or expect to hear from her while deflecting any attempt at genuine explanation on her part.

[7]

This, at any rate, is the case in Season One. Season Three, especially, strives to flesh out an explanatory backstory for Villanelle, providing her with a psychological origin tale. I would argue it does so to questionable success, rather than letting the character play out as a simply present human force.

[8]

It should be noted that Gates also cites the silent era and the 1930s as important time frames for female detectives in film. (2011: 9 & 24-26)

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TV Series

Breaking Bad (2008-2013), created by Vince Gilligan (5 seasons).

Cagney & Lacey (1981-1988), created by Barbara Avedon & Barbara Corday (7 seasons).

The Fall (2013-2016), created by Allan Cubitt (3 seasons).

How to Get Away with Murder (2014-2020), created by Peter Nowalk (6 seasons).

Killing Eve (2018-present), created by Phoebe Waller-Bridge & Sally Woodward Gentle (4 seasons).

Luther (2010-2019), created by Neil Cross (5 seasons).

Ozark (2017-2022), created by Bill Dubuque and Mark Williams, (4 seasons).

Prime Suspect (1991-96, 2003, 2006), created by Lynda La Plante (7 seasons).

The Sopranos (1999-2007), created by David Chase (6 seasons).