

DISSECTION OF PATRICIA CORNWELL'S FEMINIST WOMAN DETECTIVE KAY SCARPETTA

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ABSTRACT. *This analysis of Kay Scarpetta acknowledges the importance of feminism in the identity of this woman detective. Kay Scarpetta contests patriarchy from the root: she is a forensic anthropologist with the necessary intellectual abilities and expertise for the pursuit of criminals. She has the power to solve the murder, the patriarchal privilege enjoyed by the traditional male detective, but her characterisation retains feminine characteristics, too: she can admit to be afraid in the face of danger and she cares for victims, those lying on her autopsy table – many of whom are women – but also the ones left behind. Kay Scarpetta's identity leads her to expose the forms that women's victimisation can take in a society based on prioritising men's privileges. The obstacles that Kay Scarpetta has to overcome in order to expose patriarchy will not discourage her, though, since her ultimate goal is to help dignity and equality prevail.*

Keywords: Feminist detective fiction, Kay Scarpetta, equality, patriarchy, abuse of power, women's victimisation.

DISECCIÓN DEL FEMINISMO DE KAY SCARPETTA, LA MUJER DETECTIVE DE PATRICIA CORNWELL

RESUMEN. *Este análisis de Kay Scarpetta reconoce la importancia del feminismo en la identidad de esta mujer detective. Kay Scarpetta se opone al patriarcado desde la raíz: es una antropóloga forense con la habilidad intelectual y conocimientos necesarios para la persecución de los criminales. Tiene el poder para resolver el asesinato, el privilegio patriarcal del que gozan los detectives masculinos tradicionales, pero su caracterización conserva rasgos femeninos también: puede admitir tener miedo delante del peligro y preocuparse por las víctimas, las que se encuentran en su mesa de autopsias –muchas de las cuales son mujeres–, y también las que éstas dejan atrás. La identidad de Kay Scarpetta la lleva a exponer las formas que la victimización de la mujer puede adoptar en una sociedad basada en priorizar los privilegios masculinos. Los obstáculos que Kay Scarpetta tiene que superar a fin de exponer el patriarcado no la desalentarán, ya que su objetivo final es contribuir a que la dignidad y la igualdad prevalezcan.*

Palabras clave: Ficción feminista de detectives, Kay Scarpetta, igualdad, patriarcado, abuso de poder, victimización de las mujeres.

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In contrast to the long-standing tradition of male detective fiction, where, in general, men were privileged to play the powerful role of the detective and women were characterised as either too weak to defend themselves or too evil to be able to carry out any good deeds, feminist detective fiction has striven to prove that women can be as talented detectives as men.¹ In this way, this genre, particularly by the hand of woman writers, has reflected the changes that society has undergone since the beginning of feminism in the 19th century. In this sense, Christine A. Jackson, in her analysis of myths and rituals in detective fiction, underlines woman's changing position in society and her growing importance in detective fiction:

Today's fiction reflects the expanded range of women's opportunities in today's job market. The trend toward more women in law enforcement, for example, results in more authors depicting women characters on the police force, the crime scene, or a judge's bench. In addition, the traditional detective character represents the ultimate in independence and freedom. So it is no surprise that women with widened horizons would be attracted to books featuring women detectives" (2002: 1).

¹ Concerning the roles of women in detective fiction, Birgitta Berglund contends that "[w]omen in detective stories have been victims, or they have been perpetrators, but they have not, on the whole, been detectives –that is, they have not been given the most important part to play" (2000: 138).

Women authors of detective fiction started using the amateur female sleuths –like the well-known Agatha Christie and her Miss Marple– and as a reflection of our society, “the *professional* female character is an exhilarating newcomer to a market long dominated by men” (Mizejewski 2004: 2). Contemporary woman detective writers, though, have not been content to simply promote women to the powerful role of detective and they have also endeavoured to expose the disadvantaged situation in which women live in our patriarchal society. With this framework in mind, this analysis intends to dissect the deconstruction of current patriarchal beliefs and hierarchies in Patricia Cornwell’s portrayal of the woman detective and the hindrances that she has to face at work.

Patricia Cornwell’s reversal of roles to dismantle the patriarchal consideration of men as superior beings positions Kay Scarpetta as the main detective whose intellectual skills and professionalism lead to the final solution of the crime or crimes, which highlights her suitability for the job. Kay Scarpetta retains the most positive attributes of the traditional detective. She has the necessary intellectual abilities, logical powers as well as the brilliant imagination or intuition of the classical detective, which allow her to observe crime scenes closely and make the most incredible deductions from insignificant details. For instance, in *All That Remains* (1992) she is the one that notices that a victim is not wearing her shoes, an essential clue that leads to the final solution of the crime (*All That Remains* 324). Kay Scarpetta’s ratiocination works hand in hand with her forensic knowledge and use of the latest technology, like when in *The Last Precinct* (2000) Kay Scarpetta explains that she routinely uses a Luma-Lite to “to detect fingerprints, drugs and body fluids not visible to the unaided eye” (*The Last Precinct* 24). Moreover, from time to time, some hints in the story suggest that Kay Scarpetta is gifted with almost supernatural traits in terms of detection techniques; in *Cause of Death* (1996) the reader is told that she is one of the few who can smell cyanide (*Cause of Death* 44). Besides, Kay Scarpetta also has the ability to think like the killer, “her approach to a scene similar to a predator’s. She moves from the outer edge to the inside, saving the worst for last” (*Predator* 171). Apart from being talented, Kay Scarpetta works really hard and books like *All That Remains* (1992) or *Trace* (2004) begin showing Kay Scarpetta working during the weekend. To top it all, she is perfectionist as well as stubborn and will not rest until she finds what she is looking for or an explanation that satisfies her completely.

Even those who resent women with authority, like Dr. Joe Amos in *Predator* (2005), cannot help but be impressed by Kay Scarpetta’s career. As an example, the following quote is worth a look:

It is hard for Joe to believe how many cases Scarpetta has worked in what is a relatively brief career. Forensic pathologists rarely land their first job until they are thirty,

assuming their arduous educational track is continuous. Added to her six years of postgraduate medical training were three more for law school. By the time she was thirty-five, she was the chief of the most prominent medical examiner system in the United States. Unlike most chiefs, she wasn't just an administrator. She did autopsies, thousands of them. [...] And she's even gotten federal grants to conduct various research studies on violence –sexual violence, drug-related violence, domestic violence– all kinds of violence. (*Predator* 74)

However, in spite of having a vastly recognised good reputation because of her talents, efficiency and authority in her job and being, thus, famous, Kay Scarpetta resents the stress laid on being a woman: “female should not be an adjective. Nobody talks about successful men in terms of a male doctor or male president or male CEO” (*The Last Precinct* 94). According to Kay Scarpetta, the emphasis should be on professionalism disregarding whether you are a man or a woman, since your performance at work is not gender-dependant and being a successful woman in the public sphere should not be considered exceptional.

The extremely favourable portrayal of the woman investigator is the perfect wrapping that allows Patricia Cornwell to challenge the traditional conception of women. In a patriarchal society men are thought to be the superior beings who are entitled to climb to the top of the power hierarchy, whereas women are considered inferior and should hold the least privileged positions. According to these constraints, men have been considered fathers, protectors and providers for women, whereas women should be, above all, mothers, child-bearers and caregivers.² Then, if conventional gender restrictions are taken into account, Kay Scarpetta, as a forensic scientist, has a traditionally-called ‘unwomanly’ profession. As Vanacker phrases the idea:

[S]he has radically crossed the limits of her gender role [...] and] departs considerably from the traditional constraints and qualities associated with her gender. Rather than being culturally associated (as female) with life and life giving, this woman hero is a dealer in death, who aggressively ‘manhandles’ the corpses of victims and gruesomely thrives off decaying and decomposing bodies. (1997: 65-66)

Kay Scarpetta does not conform to the parameters of one who, as a woman, is supposed to give life, but she deals with gore corpses as part of her daily routine. From a patriarchal point of view, the one that Kay Scarpetta’s mother and sister support in the series, she is a failure as a woman: she is divorced, has no children and has chosen the professional over the domestic. Nevertheless, the

² Kenneth Clatterbaugh explains the traditional gender roles when discussing the conservative perspective on masculinity (1990: 151).

series deconstructs such beliefs since Kay Scarpetta's life is guided by high moral ideals: she intends to unveil horrendous crimes in order to restore victims' identity and dignity and help those mourning for them.

Subverting the patriarchal identity of women as mothers, Kay Scarpetta's relationship with her niece Lucy and Lucy's mother further supports the feminist belief that women are not necessarily motherly. From the beginning of the series, Dorothy, Kay Scarpetta's sister, is portrayed as a bad mother for Lucy, as someone who does not pay enough attention to her daughter due to her work –writing children's books– and her boyfriends. In order to make up for this situation, “Scarpetta herself functions as a surrogate mother to her niece Lucy”, as Vanacker points out (1997: 76). In this way, Kay Scarpetta's attitude supports the feminist belief that natural mothers are not inevitably the best mothers, as being a mother is not a question of nature but of behaviour: being a mother does not involve giving birth, as patriarchy upholds, but providing care and affection.

Kay Scarpetta's outstanding professionalism as a detective in a male world does not make her masculine, though. As Cranny-Francis remarks, “[i]f the female detective should lose her femininity, should not be somehow specifically female, then the difficult exercise of creating a female hero loses all value” (1990: 166). In this sense, Kay Scarpetta is brave but, at the same time, in contrast to the classic hard-boiled male hero, she is also fearful, aware of the dangers inherent in any investigation, and does not hide her fear. In *All That Remains* (1992) Kay Scarpetta enters, all by herself, the shop where the suspect of the murders is supposed to work and she says she feels “weak in the knees” (*All That Remains* 365). Kay Scarpetta shows that she is ready to do whatever she feels is her duty, because she will face danger when her intuition tells her to investigate a certain clue, and she will not wait for anybody else to do her job. However, she is not prevented from confessing she is frightened when her common sense and expertise tell her that danger is very near, a personality trait that is generally common among woman investigators.³

Another traditionally regarded female trait that Kay Scarpetta incorporates in her identity as a woman hero is empathy. Not only is she very careful with the bodies of those who have been killed but she also cares for those who they leave behind: “[...] no one respects the dead more than those of us who work with them and hear their silent stories. The purpose is to hear the living” (*The Body Farm* 316). She can even imagine, feel and make the reader feel the

³ Cranny-Francis includes this comment when talking about Marcia Muller (1990: 167).

suffering and loneliness of the victims: “I imagined the existentialist terror Emily Steiner must have felt before she died. No matter where that might have been, no one had heard her smallest cry, no one had come to save her” (*The Body Farm* 72-73). Vanacker, comparing Paretsky, Grafton and Cornwell, remarks that these writers “offer us an altered detective hero [...] which rejects the aggressiveness, the separateness of the masculine hero subject” (1997: 83-84). Kay Scarpetta functions, in this way, as a feminist woman investigator who involves herself and rejects the traditional male detective’s emotional detachment, since doing her job involves the use of her intellectual abilities together with her deepest feelings towards others.

When focusing on the investigator’s empathy with the victims, her close relationship with them makes the woman detective become the guardian of the victims’ honour and demands respect for them: “[a] violent death is a public event and it is this facet of my profession that so rudely grated against my sensibilities. I did what I could to preserve the dignity of the victims” (*Postmortem* 11). Through Kay Scarpetta’s eyes, the reader shares her sorrow, anger and helplessness at the terrible sight of a corpse:

After several minutes of a constant warm bath, I began to very slowly and gently separate the thick broken glass from the dead woman’s face, the skin pulling and distorting as I peeled, making her all the more horrible to look at. Fielding and I worked in silence for a while, gently laying shards and sections of heat-stressed glass tub. This took about an hour, and when we were done, the stench was stronger. What was left of the poor woman seemed more pitiful and small, and the damage to her head was even more striking. (*Point of Origin* 114-115)

Kay Scarpetta’s description of the atrocities that she sees on corpses reflects the typical empathic female gaze that identifies the woman detective in feminist detective fiction and which stands in head-on opposition to the predatory male gaze, as commented by Simpson in his analysis of serial killers (2000: 103-104).

Such a strong link between the woman investigator and the victims leads her to not only empathise but also identify with them, turning the detective physically indistinguishable from them and becoming the serial killer’s next target. In *Postmortem* (1990), for example, Kay Scarpetta points out that one of the victims had her same profession, had gone through the same long medical training (*Postmortem* 18) and at the end of the book she is physically attacked by the killer. Apart from physical danger, the woman detective’s involvement with the victims as well as the pursuit of justice also entail psychological hazard. At the end of *Body of Evidence* (1991), for instance, after Kay Scarpetta has been

attacked by the killer at home, she talks about the way she feels: "As for my psyche, I wasn't sure what anyone could do about that. I didn't feel like myself. I wasn't sure what I felt except that it was very hard for me to sit still. It was impossible to relax" (*Body of Evidence* 378). Kay Scarpetta's struggle to apprehend the wrong-doer may leave her so deeply 'wounded' that she needs to get away from it all and spend some time devoted to her healing in order to come back and be able to take up her duties again; the detective's journey in pursuit of justice for the victims is followed by her own personal healing journey to get her physical and psychological strength back. At the end of *Postmortem* (1990), for instance, Kay Scarpetta decides to return to Miami, her birthplace, with Lucy, her niece, for a holiday (*Postmortem* 398). After repeatedly seeing so much violence on victims every day at work, psychological wounds may also leave a more permanent imprint, as flashes of the dead keep playing in her mind when she shuts her eyes (*Point of Origin* 79).

Patricia Cornwell's criticism of the dreadful effects derived from patriarchy and of its hierarchical dominance-submission pattern becomes evident when analysing Kay Scarpetta's work environment, too. The most violent representative of patriarchal beliefs throughout the series is embodied in the serial killer, who typifies patriarchal endemic violence against women and maximum male power abuse. The serial killer and his crimes become, at Patricia Cornwell's hands, the metaphor for the extreme form of patriarchal gender interactions. Women are the ones who crowd the list of victims in well over half of the books in the series and the typology of their victimisation ranges from physical cruelty to rape or death. Kay Scarpetta's descriptions of the way that victims have died prove the serial killer's cruelty and dismantle gender relations based on male abuse of power:

This had been an awful way to die. Eva Peebles had suffered physical pain and abject terror while the killer had his sadistic fun with her. It was a wonder and a pity she didn't die of a heart attack before he'd finished her off.

Based on the sharp upward angle of the rope around her neck, she wasn't rendered unconscious quickly, but likely suffered the agony of not being able to breathe as the pressure of the rope under her chin occluded her airway. Unconsciousness due to a lack of oxygen can take minutes that seem forever. She would have kicked like mad had he not bound her ankles together, which might be why he'd done so. (*Scarpetta* 406-407)

In Patricia Cornwell's novels the serial killer becomes, quoting Simpson, the "[...] nightmarish embodiment of masculine backlash against female encroachment into the traditional male arenas of power" (2000: 114).

Looking for an explanation for men's physical violence against women, Pilcher and Whelehan state that "violence has been identified as a key mechanism in the subordination of women by men" (2005: 173). Kay Scarpetta, though, having to face the magnitude of the serial killer's brutality as part of her job, cannot determine a logical explanation despite her experience: "I have never related to the human desire to torture. I know the dynamics, that it is about control, the ultimate abuse of power. But I can't comprehend deriving satisfaction, vindication and certainly not sexual pleasure out of causing any living creature pain" (*The Last Precinct* 341).

In this context, Kay Scarpetta and the serial killer are the rivals in a relentless war in which the male serial killer needs to reassert his masculinity physically abusing, torturing, raping and/or killing women victims. His behaviour obviously leads him to feel threatened by the woman detective, who unyieldingly pursues a manhunt to stop his deadly violence against women, becoming his target herself or the object of his desire. In *Blow Fly* (2003), for example, the serial killer even expresses his sexual desire for her, wishing his victim's body turned into Scarpetta's (*Blow Fly* 8). In the detective's encounter with the serial offender, Kay Scarpetta shows a progressive familiarity and success with the use of weapons, proving that a woman is capable of defending herself and mastering the use of weapons. As Simpson contends, "[i]n Scarpetta's world, women have no choice but to arm themselves heavily and turn their upper-middle-class homes into fortresses" (2000: 119). Nevertheless, Kay Scarpetta uses deadly force only when she has no choice, when the situation is clearly perceived as kill or be killed.⁴ At the end, in the serial killer-Scarpetta confrontation, the woman detective is the one who emerges victorious most of the times and the disruptor of the status quo is apprehended, following the usual detective fiction convention and contributing to a fictional triumph of feminism.

On the other hand, regarding professional relationships in Kay Scarpetta's daily (and less dramatic) work routine, men's reactions to her are varied and many times, due to sexist preconceptions, they express their surprise at finding a woman in a position of authority. In *All That Remains* (1992) a young police officer blocks her access to a murder scene because he does not expect a

⁴ Reddy highlights this use of violence by women detectives, particularly by hard-boiled investigators, in the following quote:

None of the women detectives usually takes pleasure in violence and none initiates it, as the male detectives often do; however, these books suggest that violence may sometimes be the only possible response to a violent milieu and all of the detectives are able to hold their own in a fight. These women refuse the conventionally feminine role of victim, fighting back against those who would victimize them and thereby preserving themselves (1993: 113).

woman to be the medical examiner (*All That Remains* 5-6). A motel clerk in *The Body Farm* (1994) assumes that Pete Marino, Kay Scarpetta's workmate, is the one who is the doctor simply because he is a man (*The Body Farm* 136). Kay Scarpetta's words in the first book of the series *Postmortem* (1990) anticipate more serious consequences and foresee that men resent powerful women with authority like her and will do whatever they can to destroy her: "The dead have never bothered me. It is the living I fear" (*Postmortem* 35).

Apart from surprise, Kay Scarpetta, as an intruder in the male preserve of police investigation, finds obstacles intended to position her as an outsider. Essential documents, like "copies of the confidential sections of the police reports, scene photographs, or inventories of evidence" (*All That Remains* 30), or clues recovered from crime scenes (*All That Remains* 200), are sometimes withheld from the woman investigator. Denying Kay Scarpetta access to information may sometimes expose the corruption of some police officers, as is the case of Detective Roche in *Cause of Death* (1996). However, whatever male police tricks used to prevent Kay Scarpetta from solving the crimes are dismantled and her capacity as a professional woman to carry out a good work is, thus, reinforced.

Throughout the series, Kay Scarpetta is also professionally targeted over and over again by sexist male workmates who cannot accept women intruders in their male preserve because women's professional excellence in the public and work spheres jeopardises the patriarchal belief in men's superiority. Roy Patterson, attorney general for Virginia, prosecutes Kay Scarpetta in *Cruel and Unusual* (1993) as the suspect of several murders – he is driven by his hatred for her after she ridiculed him in court when he was a defence attorney (*Cruel and Unusual* 304-305); or in *The Last Precinct* (2000) another male sabotage takes place: Kay Scarpetta is being investigated by a special grand jury hearing since Chandonne, the serial killer in the book, has stated that Kay Scarpetta is part of a criminal conspiracy against him (*The Last Precinct* 289). Kay Scarpetta must confront many serious accusations throughout the series and to top it all, she is unsupported by powerful influential men around her: in *Cruel and Unusual* (1993) Governor Joe Norring temporarily relieves Kay Scarpetta of her duties (*Cruel and Unusual* 322) and in *The Last Precinct* (2000) Governor Mitchell asks Kay Scarpetta to relinquish her duties until the situation is cleared (*The Last Precinct* 515). Thus, the drawback of being a successful talented woman intruding the patriarchally considered men's world is that there is a price to be paid and Kay Scarpetta cannot escape from institutional persecution and male conspiracy.

When analysing the portrayal of women's professional victimisation, the Scarpetta series also speaks for unfairly professionally targeted women in general

terms. This is the case of Pat Harvey in *All That Remains* (1992). She is the National Drug Policy Director, a presidential appointee who has prosecuted high-profile drug cases in the federal system. Now, at the time of her daughter's murder, she has become a very dangerous person for powerful organisations, as she is involved in gathering evidence to prove that the charity ACTMAD (American Coalition of Tough Mothers against Drugs) has been used as a front for a drug cartel and other illegal activities in Central America. At this crucial moment in her life, her political male allies back away when she is ridiculed and dismissed as hysterical by the media. The book ends with the complete destruction of this politician, who, psychologically and professionally ruined, decides to commit suicide after killing her daughter's murderer. Pat Harvey's final ruin highlights the extremely negative consequences of patriarchal encroachment on successful women and how devastating masculinist preconceptions can be.

Having to go through so many difficulties to succeed despite their talents, women in the Kay Scarpetta series have a deep understanding of the intimate connection between power and corruption. Abby Turnbull, a reporter in *All That Remains* (1992), is convinced of this mutual interrelation: "[t]hat's the beauty of Washington. [...] The most successful, powerful people in the world are there and half of them are crazy, the other half neurotic. Most of them are immoral. Power does it" (*All That Remains* 360). So is Kay Scarpetta: "[p]olitics and power. They have an unmistakable stench, rather much like the inside of the morgue fridge. I can close my eyes and know what's there. Nothing alive" (*Blow Fly* 136). Kay Scarpetta shows very strong opinions about power abuse and corruption and what hurts her most is that she can be accused of the maximum abuse of power, that is, homicide, simply because she is an eminent and gifted professional:

"[m]y integrity is the one thing I've got that I can't afford to lose. It's everything to me, and of all people to accuse of such a crime. Of all people! To even consider that I would do the very thing I fight against every walking minute of my life? Never. I don't abuse power. Never. I don't deliberately hurt people. Never" (*The Last Precinct* 378).

Kay Scarpetta's identity is essentially defined by feminist ideals that intend to deconstruct the patriarchal conception of women as dependant on men by means of depicting the terrible consequences patriarchy brings about. Kay Scarpetta's behaviour in her daily life, together with her firm attitude against injustice and patriarchal abuse of power, rounds off her feminist identity as worth admiring. In order to confront male hierarchical attacks, Kay Scarpetta lays emphasis on a joint effort rather than on individual action. If women choose to fight single-handedly, they are bound to lose the battle, as is Pat Harvey's case. In sharp contrast to this position, several people help Kay Scarpetta to disclose

any sabotage intended to ruin her career. In the cases which are designed to accuse Kay Scarpetta of murder, she works together with her team, that is, Pete Marino, Benton Wesley and Lucy Farinelli, and consults the necessary specialists so that the true criminal is disclosed and the accusations against her are cleared. Quoting Tomc regarding her comparison of Harris' *The Silence of the Lambs*, British TV series *Prime Suspect* and Cornwell's *Postmortem*, she argues that "the stress in all three works [lies] on corporate over independent action and occupational over gender alliances" (1995: 58). Thus, the final goal of Kay Scarpetta's investigation is to apprehend the killer and to do justice, so the best experts, regardless of gender, should join efforts and work together in order to make justice triumph.

Both patriarchal workmates and institutions are confronted throughout the series. This criticism, though, embodies an essential contradiction: on the one hand, patriarchy is exposed by the detective (that is, a member of the system) with the help of her closest team mates Pete Marino, Benton Wesley and Lucy Farinelli (that is, people working within the system) and on the other, the final solution of the crimes endorses law-enforcement institutions and supports a return to the status quo, which involves confirming the rightness of this patriarchal stasis and the male-dominated status quo responsible for the woman detective's victimization. In this sense, Messent remarks that Kay Scarpetta stands for a "continuing confidence in the 'goodness' and a complete acceptance of the social order which it defends" (2000: 16-17).

Messent's remark, however, could not take into account later changes in the series. In *The Last Precinct* (2000), after being fired from the position of chief medical examiner in Richmond due to political reasons, Kay Scarpetta moves into a modest house in Florida and works as a private consultant, although her links with state institutions are not completely broken. At the beginning of *Book of the Dead* (2007), the reader sees that Kay Scarpetta retains her independence from official law-enforcement and has her own private practice, Coastal Forensic Pathology, in Charleston, providing services to some of the coroners from outlying jurisdictions where there is no access to medical examiner facilities and labs. In the following two books, *Scarpetta* (2008) and *The Scarpetta Factor* (2009), she is offering her services pro bono to the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner in New York. In this way, Kay Scarpetta is portrayed as adopting a compromise attitude towards patriarchy, at least concerning work. Kay Scarpetta cannot change either the patriarchal network that rules work relations or the sexist political apparatus unsupportive of women's harassment and begins her independent career. Nevertheless, Kay Scarpetta's prime interest is to make justice, apprehend the killer and help to prevent future murders and if her

professional expertise is required, Kay Scarpetta will not refuse to cooperate with the patriarchal law-enforcement apparatus.

In general terms, the making-up of this woman investigator is shaped by feminist goals, which essentially involve exposing our current patriarchally-ruled society for its victimization of women in a wide range of contexts. The series painfully portrays how extreme abuse of women can lead some men to the physical and/or psychological annihilation of women. The portrayal of Kay Scarpetta's character as well as her attitude to the world around her are driven by the ideal of feminist equality and thanks to her professional work, distinctive female empathy and support of a collective effort regardless of gender constraints, she can expose the social injustice, abuse of power and violence permeating our patriarchal society. In this way, the Scarpetta series reflects the essence of feminist detective fiction, which Humm summarises highlighting its "desire to manipulate both the ideological content of detective fiction *and* to change the syntactics of detective writing in order to make feminist statements about gender and representation" (1990: 237). Thus, Patricia Cornwell's series, apart from underlining women's positive contribution to the working of society, looks for the reader's complicity and final sanctioning of its social message: a better society guided by the principles of equality, respect and justice for both women and men.

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