

Sherlock Holmes from Page to Screen:
Adapting the Invisible Army

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Abstract

In this study, I aim to point to the marginalised position of the female characters in the original *Sherlock Holmes* stories. I then examine the development of the female characters in two adaptations *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* and *Sherlock*, taking in consideration the cultural context affecting the adaptation of the characters. I concentrate on two female characters in particular; Mary Morstan and Irene Adler. I study how they are represented and portrayed, and subsequently, what ideals and attitudes those portrayals and representations reflect. I also analyse the position of the female characters more generally.

I conclude that the original *Sherlock Holmes* stories distinctly reflect patriarchal social structures. In *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* the female characters' position is deteriorated as a result of the prevailing ideals in the 1980s-1990s. Lastly, in *Sherlock* the female characters are more fully developed, although the means of developing might in some cases be ineffective or misguided. Nonetheless, the development of the female characters in the more modern adaptation helps undo the patriarchal structures reflected in the original canon.

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1 Introduction

“The invisible army, hovering at our elbow, tending to our homes, raising our children, ignored, patronised, disregarded [...]” (“The Abominable Bride”, *Sherlock* 2010-).

The stories of the hawk nosed sleuth, Sherlock Holmes, have endured for 130 years, resulting in various adaptations in all sorts of media, from radio dramas to fan fictions. The consulting detective is readily identified around the world even from the simple images of a deerstalker hat, a magnifying glass and a pipe, and phrases such as ‘elementary, my dear Watson’ have become almost proverbial.¹ The stories gained widespread popularity early on, as the first translation appeared no later than in the 1890s and the first Holmes film in 1900 (Roden ix). However, those who remain hidden in the background, are the female characters; the marginalised and ignored women fighting for equality, i.e. ‘the invisible army’.

The purpose of this study is to analyse the portrayal and representation of the female characters in *Sherlock Holmes* (1887-1927), and the TV series adaptations *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1984-1994) and *Sherlock* (2010-). The focus will be on pointing to the oppressed and marginalised position of the female characters in the short-stories, and to some extent, in the adaptations, as well as examining the development of the female characters in the adaptations.

1.1. Arthur Conan Doyle and the History of Sherlock Holmes

Arthur Ignatius Conan Doyle (1859-1930) came from an artistic background, with his grandfather working as a political cartoonist, his uncle as an illustrator and a diarist, and his father as an artist as well (Roden ix-x). Perhaps, it is then not surprising that Conan Doyle also pursued the more artistically inclined career of an author. With his stories of the machine-like detective – first one being *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) – Conan Doyle “was almost single-handedly responsible for creating a huge public interest in tales of mystery and detection” (Roden xiv). The Holmes stories consist of three sets of short-stories; *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892), *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (1894), and *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* (1904) (Forshaw 227-228). After the

¹ Although the phrase ‘elementary, my dear Watson’ is considered to be a signature phrase of Holmes, it is never actually mentioned in Doyle’s original writings (Roden ix).

first two collections, Doyle became so reluctant to continue the stories that he killed off the beloved sleuth, resulting in a public uproar, and condolences poured to the offices of *The Strand* magazine (Forshaw 227). However, he decided to resurrect the character with the publication of the third collection of short-stories. The legacy of these stories lived on and, for instance, Agatha Christie “admitted that she based her own Hercule Poirot and Capt. Hastings on ACD’s creations, and she pays tribute to Conan Doyle [...] in her 1963 novel *The Clocks* [...]” (Roden xv). The long-enduring popularity of Sherlock Holmes has lasted all the way to the 21st century, resulting in various adaptations.

As was mentioned, the first adaptation was published no later than in 1900, and many more have followed. Some of the adaptations insist on remaining as faithful as possible to the original canon and “achieve dignity by making no attempt to be anything but straightforward representations of the Canonical stories” (Redmond 153). Some, on the other hand, do not shun alteration and “may claim to be works of art in their own right, somehow rising above the taint of being “derivative”” (Redmond 153). Nevertheless, all interpretations of the original stories keep the legacy of Sherlock Holmes alive.

1.2. On Adaptation

An adaptation, although deriving from a book, “is [...] independent, an artistic achievement that is in some mysterious way the “same” as the book, but also something other [...]” (Beja 88). Therefore, it is inevitable that the cultural context and attitudes of a particular time, when the adaptation is made, would interfere or contribute to the adaptation. Although some creators of an adaptation might insist on fidelity, each adaptation is only an interpretation of the original. Geoffrey Wagner lists three types of adaptations, none of which escape change:

(a) *transposition*, ‘in which a novel is given directly on the screen with a minimum of apparent interference’; (b) *commentary*, ‘where an original is taken and either purposely or inadvertently altered in some respect ... when there has been a different intention on the part of the film-maker, rather than infidelity or outright violation’; and (c) *analogy*, ‘which must represent a fairly considerable departure for the sake of making another work of art’. (qtd. in McFarlane 10-11)

Of the two adaptations I study, *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* would certainly be categorised as ‘transposition’, and *Sherlock* as ‘commentary’. The 1980s-1990s adaptation remains faithful to the

original canon; a lot of the original dialogue is preserved and the series is set in the Victorian era as were Doyle's stories. *Sherlock* on the other hand is altered in many ways, yet it is not a significant departure of the original stories; the episodes are set in the 21st century London as opposed to the Victorian setting, and the series overtly criticises the female characters' poor position, which was certainly in need of alteration when adapted in the 21st century.

1.3. Feminist Criticism

One issue that is, perhaps, one of the major contributors when it comes to changes made in an adaptation, is feminist criticism. As the original might lack in portraying equality and women's rights, the adaptation needs to be brought to the modern era to parallel the prevailing values. Feminist studies emerged already during the early 20th century, and they were, and are, needed as we are faced "with a long history of patriarchal theory which claims to have proved decisively the inferiority of women [...]" (Eagleton 5).

According to Peter Barry, "the feminist literary criticism of today is the direct product of the 'women's movement' [...]" (116). The women's movement, following the footsteps of feminist studies, was a major turning point in the social structures concerning equality between women and men and was formed in the beginning of the 1970s (Casetti 220). The aim of this movement was to particularly draw attention to "the marginality of female roles", and marginalisation of female characters is a significant issue in Doyle's Holmes stories as well (Casetti 220).

Much of the attention of the feminist movement and feminist criticism was aimed towards literature as "this movement was [...] literary from the start, in the sense that it realised the significance of the images of women promulgated by literature, and saw it as vital to combat them [...]" (Barry 116). Barry also points out that "critical attention was given to books by male writers in which influential or typical images of women were constructed" (117). As literature has a significant role in defining the values of its time, feminist criticism aims to point to the problematic representations of women in literature. Furthermore, "in feminist criticism in the 1970s the major effort went into exposing what might be called the mechanisms of patriarchy, that is, the cultural 'mind-set' in men and women which perpetuated sexual inequality" (Barry 117). Similarly, in this study the patriarchal structures reflected in the representations of the female characters in Holmes stories and adaptations are examined.

2 *Sherlock Holmes* (1887-1927) and a Study in Feminism

Traditionally, “a phallogocentric” point of view predominates 19th century literature, especially in the case of detective fiction (Makinen 1). Merja Makinen argues that the genre’s canon “privileges conservative and phallogocentric values in its choice of favoured texts” (1). Hence, the genre itself is not inherently ‘phallogocentric’, but the genre’s canon favours those texts which portray patriarchal structures. Phallogocentrism here refers to male-dominated attitudes as well as to features traditionally associated with masculinity such as reason, rationality and order. An example of phallogocentric detective fiction, in addition to *Sherlock Holmes*, could be Edgar Allan Poe’s stories of the detective called C. Auguste Dupin, who is also described as unusually analytical and rational. Thus, the more ‘masculine’ feature, rationality, is emphasised and considered a virtue as opposed to its counterpart, irrationality, that would traditionally be considered a feminine feature. An essential part of this genre’s canon is *Sherlock Holmes*, where women are portrayed as male characters’ property and are depicted within the lines of Victorian conventions where “the attributes that literature commonly ascribes to women are formlessness, passivity, instability (hysteria), irrationality, compliancy, and incorrigibility” (Mary Ellmann qtd. in Donovan 3). Additionally, Chantel Langlais defines the ideal Victorian woman as follows:

The ideal woman during the Victorian era was compared to an angel, perfect both physically and morally, and Victorian art and fiction perpetuate this ideal. Society should ask nothing else of her than to be the perfect wife and mother and to take care of her husband’s and the household’s needs. She should be comforting and compassionate and provide a safe haven from a turbulent outside world. If the woman failed in these duties, she posed a threat to society, because she would inevitably disrupt the order society had established. (84)

A significant feature here is how the woman is seen in relation to other people, for instance as a mother or a wife, but not as an individual, thus pointing to the woman’s limited role and function. This definition of an ideal Victorian woman is similar to the term *the angel in the house*; a female character in literature who was, according to Virginia Woolf,

[...] intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. [...] she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all – I need not say it

– she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty – her blushes, her great grace. (2)

Again, an emphasis is placed on the importance of family, thus the woman is seen in relation to others. Furthermore, Woolf points to the significance of purity, thus moral perfection of the woman is emphasised as well. Patriarchal structures, such as representations similar to the aforementioned descriptions, are displayed in the female characters in *Sherlock Holmes*. Firstly, in that the female characters are portrayed as male characters' property, and also in how they – in this case Mary Morstan and Irene Adler – are represented.

2.1. The Finances of Marriage

In *Sherlock Holmes* women are portrayed as objects of exchange and marriage is considered primarily a financial concept or enterprise. The key question is who – the father or the husband – profits monetarily when the woman marries. Therefore, women are considered as male property in these short-stories.

The first example of women being portrayed as male property in *Sherlock Holmes* is from the short-story "A Study in Scarlet" (1887), where the female character Lucy Ferrier is forced to marry. Difficult conditions drive Lucy and her father to join a Mormon society, where polygamy is customary. Lucy's father opposes this custom and the two try to escape, yet they fail in their endeavour; their companion Jefferson Hope finds that "Lucy had been carried back by their terrible pursuers to fulfil her original destiny, by becoming one of the harem of an Elder's son" (Doyle 58). Lucy is then seemingly given a choice of whom to marry, although the options given were as limited as two men. Eventually "there was some words between young Drebber and young Stangerson as to which was to have her [...] Drebber's party was the stronger, so the Prophet gave her over to him" (Doyle 59). Thus, Lucy does not have a say in who she was to marry at all.

Another example is of the short-story "A Case of Identity" (1891), where Mary Sutherland approaches Sherlock with the mystery of her disappeared fiancé. Mary and a man called Hosmer Angel got engaged soon after meeting each other. Hosmer then made Mary promise that even if something unexpected occurred she was to stay true to her fiancé. Then, on their wedding day Hosmer disappeared. As a result, Miss Sutherland would not marry anyone else as she was faithfully waiting for her fiancé to return. It turns out that her step-father had disguised himself as

'Hosmer Angel' as he was jealously holding on to the income which Mary produced for the family, which the family would have lost if she was to marry. Sherlock concluded that "he [the step-father] enjoyed the use of the money of the daughter as long as she lived with them [...] it was worth an effort to preserve it" (Doyle 182).

The economics of marriage are, again, manifested in "The Speckled Band" (1892). The step-father of Helen Stoner similarly wants to prevent his two step-daughters from getting married for financial reasons:

Each daughter can claim an income of £250, in case of marriage. It is evident, therefore, that if both girls had married, this beauty would have had a mere pittance, while even one of them would cripple him to a very serious extent [...] it has proved that he [the step-father] has the very strongest motives for standing in the way of anything of the sort. (Doyle 246)

The last example is of the short-story "The Sign of the Four" (1890). The female character Mary Morstan is supposedly about to inherit a large sum of money, the Agra treasure. Thus, John Watson thinks that he could not ask Mary to marry him if she was to inherit the treasure:

Worse still, she is rich [...] Was it fair, was it honourable, that a half-pay surgeon should take such advantage of an intimacy which chance had brought about? Might she not look upon me as a mere vulgar fortune-seeker? [...] This Agra treasure intervened like an impassable barrier between us. (Doyle 100)

However, it is revealed in the end of the short-story that the treasure is lost, consequently "the golden barrier" between John and Mary is gone, and Mary is "within [John's] reach again" (Doyle 126). These four examples demonstrate how women were seen as property of men, being forced to marry or not being permitted to, for financial reasons. They also show how the financial effects of marriage were emphasised, thus the female characters become objects of exchange.

In addition to these examples demonstrating the female characters' poor position as male character's property, Holmes does not help the women gain autonomy, although he solves the cases and finds the culprit. Jasmine Yong points out that instead of helping the women attain independence he is, in fact, "facilitating the exchange of these women [...] from father to husband" (303). For instance, in "A Case of Identity" Holmes does not actually even inform his client of the conclusion of the case, and this he reasoned by saying

if I tell her she will not believe me. You may not remember the old Persian saying, “There is danger for him who taketh the tiger cub, and danger also for whoso snatches a delusion from a woman [...]. (Doyle 184)²

Also, in “The Speckled Band” the fate of Helen Stoner is blatantly deemed unimportant by Watson as he does not want to “prolong a narrative” by telling what happened to her (Doyle 252).

Therefore, it can also be concluded that these stories do not place an emphasis on redeeming the victims – i.e. women – from their plight, but rather on the intricate puzzle that the male characters get to solve.

2.2. Representations of Mary Morstan and Irene Adler

The representations of the characters Mary Morstan and Irene Adler reflect the patriarchal social structures either by complying with the description of an ideal Victorian woman or by deviating from the ideals and consequently being portrayed as unacceptable. Mary is depicted as the conventional, ideal woman, whereas Irene contrasts Mary being a strong and unconventional New Woman.³ Sally Ledger describes the New Woman of Victorian literature as “the ‘wild woman’, ‘the glorified spinster’, the ‘advanced woman’, the ‘odd woman’; the ‘modern woman’ [...]” (3). Leslie Fiedler states that “the dream role and the nightmare role alike deny the humanity of women” as do the portrayals of Mary and Irene (qtd. in Donovan 7). The ‘dream role’, i.e. ‘the acceptable’ female character is problematic in that the representation is not realistic; certainly, moral and physical perfection are not attainable. In addition to that, here the dream role suggests that passivity is a desirable trait in a woman, as the dream role’s agency is very limited. Furthermore, as Irene is depicted as ‘the nightmare role’, it deems independence, strength and resoluteness in a woman as unacceptable and as threatening to the society.

Mary Morstan is introduced in “The Sign of the Four” (1890). John Watson gives a full account of her appearance and the general first impression of her. Within Victorian tradition, Mary is the

² Not only does this citation demonstrate how Sherlock refuses to help the female character, but it also reflects distinct patriarchal attitudes. Here a woman is considered an irrational and delusional being, as the words conjure up an image of a woman tending her delusion like a tiger would tend its cub. Furthermore, the woman is presented as a fragile person who needs to be protected from the reality by men.

³ In addition to being “[...] a fictional construct, a discursive response [...]” the New Woman was also a social phenomenon associated with “[...] the late nineteenth-century women’s movement” (Ledger 1). In many cases the term is used to refer to “[...] late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century feminists” (Ledger 1).

epitome of an ideal woman, standing up to every standard of conventionality. John describes her in the following manner:

Miss Morstan entered the room with a firm step and an outward composure of manner. She was a blonde young lady, small, dainty, well gloved, and dressed in the most perfect taste. [...] Her face had neither regularity of feature nor beauty of complexion, but her expression was sweet and amiable, and her large blue eyes were singularly spiritual and sympathetic. [...] I have never looked upon a face which gave a clearer promise of a refined and sensitive nature. (Doyle 80)

This description can be almost perfectly juxtaposed with Langlais' statement that an ideal Victorian woman was to be "perfect both physically and morally", therefore Mary is reflecting an air of conventionality, as stated before (84). Moreover, the ideal woman in Victorian fiction is often compared to an angel, as Langlais points out that "the representation of the Victorian woman as the idealised "angel in the house" permeates both the art and writing of the Victorian era", so is the case in this short-story (73). As the story advances and they discover that a murder has been committed, John escorts Mary back to her home and he describes Mary's behavior as "angelic" as "she had borne trouble with a calm face as long as there was someone weaker than herself to support [...]" (Doyle 100). In addition to being compared to an angel – which represents moral perfection and purity – Mary is also given maternal features as she is "taking care of someone weaker than herself" (Doyle 100). This further justifies the claim of her being portrayed as the ideal woman.

As to her function, she is blatantly portrayed as a 'damsel in distress' as Mrs Forrester comments on the case as being "a romance", and continues to refer to Mary as "an injured lady" at the mercies of "a black cannibal, and a wooden-legged ruffian" (Doyle 113). Mary herself goes on to describe John and Sherlock as "two knight-errants to the rescue" (Doyle 113). Moreover, as was mentioned before, as soon as Holmes and Watson start properly investigating the murder, Mary is escorted back home. She does not participate after she has fulfilled her function, which is a catalyst for the plot to advance, a client who sets the solving of the mystery in motion. For the whole of the story Mary sits back as the two 'knight-errants' solve the case. The fact that the ideal woman is marginalised and portrayed as a passive stander-by or 'a wall flower', reflects the patriarchal attitudes of Doyle and the Victorian society in general.

The opposing polar end of the passive, ideal, conventional woman, is the unconventional, strong woman: the New Woman. Irene Adler is introduced in the short-story “A Scandal in Bohemia” (1891). Lawrence Frank argues that “it is a freedom from the social construction of gender that Irene Adler seeks [...]”, agreeing with the definition of the New Woman (54).

Irene’s unconventionality is displayed through her possessing both ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ features. Pascale Krumm points out that “Adler’s menacing nature is [...] revealed through a duality of female physiology and male psychology” (194). This ‘duality’ of her nature is manifested on two occasions. Firstly, the king of Bohemia states that Irene “has the face of most beautiful of women, and the mind of the most resolute of men” (Doyle 150). On another occasion, in a letter from Irene herself, she says that “male costume is nothing new to me. I often take advantage of the freedom which it gives” (Doyle 158). This, as well as supporting the notion of duality, presents Irene as opposing the inequality which prevailed between the rights of women and men. It could be assumed that Doyle was supporting the New Woman phenomenon by including such a character as Irene in this short-story. However, John Stuart Mill pointed out how women who defied conventions, were considered a ‘disruptive force’:

All women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men; not self-will and government by self-control, but submission to the control of others [...] If a woman acts out against these laws imposed upon her, she disrupts both society and the natural order of things. (qtd. in Langlinais 76)

Irene stands against the traditional ideals as she possesses ‘masculine’ features of psychology. Additionally, it is noteworthy to mention that Irene is indeed a villain in the story, and naturally, villains and criminals represent disruption and chaos.⁴ Therefore, it could be reasoned that a strong female character, challenging the conventions of a woman’s role and agency, is seen as disrupting the status quo of a patriarchal society, as Mill argued. Consequently, the proto-feminist character is stifled or defeated as Krumm points out that “chaos (i.e. Woman) is a brief but powerful threat, yet order is ultimately reinstated [...] for a brief time the world is turned upside down by Woman, the ultimate Male world order is finally restored” (200-201). Irene is ‘defeated’, not once, but in three ways. Firstly, she is ‘sanctified’ through marriage and she “acquires legitimacy in the eyes of God

⁴ The fact that a female character is a villain is not inherently problematic, as there are male villains as well. However, the fact that the only strong female character defying conventions is presented as a threat and all in all as something ‘unacceptable’ is a feminist issue. If Doyle’s stories promoted equality, a heroine – i.e. ‘an acceptable’ strong female character having agency beyond a victim – should have been included in the stories as well.

and Men” (Krumm 200). Secondly, Irene leaves the country, “assuring that Holmes (and Victorian England) is rid of a potentially dangerous physical presence”, and lastly, Irene is referred to as “the late Irene Adler”, i.e. she is dead, further assuring that the threat is defeated (Krumm 200; Doyle 145).⁵

To conclude, the female characters’ portrayals certainly do not do justice for women and distinctly reflect patriarchal attitudes. As literature often determines and defines the norms and values of a particular time, the fact that a passive woman is glorified and a strong woman is disapproved of communicates the patriarchal structures of the Victorian era. Furthermore, women are marginalised and most of the female characters are victims and clients. Fundamentally, being a client is not an issue as there are male clients as well. However, the fact that there are no female characters, save Irene, who would have agency beyond that of a client is problematic, hence women in these stories are mere plot devices. Similarly, Yong states that the female characters are presented as “a conduit for male power” in the original Holmes stories; a medium of reinforcing male dominance and patriarchal values (301). In addition to the female characters being mere clients and victims, the stories do not seem to consider it important whether they eventually get the help they sought, when they came to Sherlock. Instead, the focus is on the male characters’ intellectual bombast. Also, it is an important matter that many of the cases which Sherlock investigates have to do with the female characters’ autonomy, thus the gravity of the female characters’ neglect is emphasised.

⁵ In addition to Irene being represented as a disruptive force, the inherent bias of what features are considered masculine or feminine, should be taken into consideration. Here, intelligence and independence are represented as masculine features, and physical features, such as beauty, are considered feminine. From a feminist perspective, this is a flawed conception in terms of equality and it further reflects the patriarchy which is portrayed in Doyle’s writing.

3 *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1984-1994) and the Regression of Feminism

The legacy of the Victorian detective lived on in many adaptations, such as the films *Sherlock Holmes Baffled* (1900) and *Sherlock Holmes and the Voices of Terror* (1942). A more recent adaptation is *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1984-1994). Feminists had drawn attention to the marginalised position of women, consequently women took substantial leaps in terms of equality, especially in the 1970s, for instance, by attaining “new spaces and roles” (Casetti 220). Regardless of that, the 1980s-1990s adaptation does not support that development. As this TV series intentionally aimed at fidelity, the female characters’ representation and position have not been developed, and have even to some extent regressed to being more marginalised than they were originally. Christopher Redmond points out that “the greatest strength of the Granada series is its detailed re-creation of the Victorian scene”, and he continues to say that Michael Cox, the producer of the TV series, “went on to talk about the extraordinary fidelity he and his colleagues had maintained to the Canonical text” (176). Neil McCaw also states that “all of the episodes in the first series show a clear reliance on Doyle [...] maintaining their original plotlines and settings and fulfilling their familiar function as detective narratives” (37-38). McCaw also recounts the approach the TV series’ producer took when making the series:

[...] Granada’s producer Michael Cox was striving for an even greater sense of textual fidelity [...] there was an almost dogmatic sense of the Holmesian ‘canon’ of original stories being the definitive guide to the series, with fidelity to this canon seen as an indicator of cultural value (seemingly) moral righteousness; there was a perceived *duty* to be loyal to the originating sources. (38)

The series can be recapitulated by saying that “this commitment to *authenticity* underpinned the development of the series [...]”, therefore the creators failed to adapt contemporary values to the series (McCaw 38).

3.1. Mary and Irene

Unsurprisingly, the episode “The Sign of the Four” (1987) recreates the aspects of the original story as faithfully as possible. For instance, “long stretches of dialogue are lifted directly from Doyle’s page” and no unexpected changes are made in terms of plot (Redmond 176). Mary walks into the 221b Baker Street apartment, states her case as she did in the short-story and the rest of the episode

progresses similarly, following the original. However, two differences in terms of plot are worth mentioning. Firstly, as do all other episodes of the TV series, this episode also begins by first depicting the crime being committed, as opposed to the original, where the story begins from the safe lodgings of Sherlock and John. There, Sherlock is ‘remedying’ the monotony of his leisure time with his “seven-per-cent solution” of cocaine (Doyle 75). Secondly, another difference is that the episode does not end with John marrying Mary and the romantic implications between them in general seem to be slightly discounted. Although some of the changes might be quite trivial, as the first one, the fact that Mary and John do not marry is rather suggestive of the character’s marginalisation.

The portrayal of the character remains somewhat similar to the original, but some changes are made. As in Doyle’s writing, here she also has “a firm step and an outward composure of manner” and the actress, Jenny Seagrove, is “a blonde young lady, small, dainty” as was Mary in the short-story (Doyle 80). Nonetheless, there is one noteworthy difference in how John describes Mary. In the original short-story Watson heeds more attention to Mary’s personality stating – among other things – that she seems “singularly spiritual and sympathetic” (Doyle 80). In addition, it is said that Mary “had neither regularity of feature nor beauty of complexion [...]” (Doyle 80). However, in this adaptation, John does not address the impression of her personality, but instead, on two occasions, simply describes her as “a very pretty young woman” or “a very attractive woman” focusing solely on her exterior and looks. This is suggestive to objectification, as other aspects apart from looks are disregarded and, perhaps, deemed unimportant. Furthermore, this also simplifies the character, which not only makes the character more uninteresting than she was originally, but also makes it easier to sideline the character as the episode progresses. In addition, this remark draws attention on how the pre-existing patriarchy that the stories reflect is bolstered as the female character is given a less extensive role than originally. Thus, the contrast between the female character and the male characters is more distinct. Moreover, as opposed to the original short-story, the adaptation decided to disregard or perhaps to ‘mend’ the fact that Mary was not described that attractive in Doyle’s writing. This is emphasising still the simplicity and constricted extent of her character. Although it is a valid point that this might just be the cause of how TV scenes inherently work, not usually having internal narration, the creators still chose to recreate the original dialogue in most cases, yet neglected that approach in this case.

Subsequently, Mary’s function and agency remain as limited as in the original story. Once more, she merely functions as a plot device. As was in the original story, soon after Holmes and Watson discover the crime that has been committed, Mary is escorted back home from the scene of the

crime, and remains there until the ‘knight-errants’ have solved the case. Also, as was mentioned before, one of the notable differences which occur in this adaptation, is that Mary and John do not marry at the end. Redmond also notes “Watson is consistently presented as unmarried” in the series (176). Virtually, the effect of this change is that Mary is further marginalised, when compared to the original story, appearing only for a few minutes in just one episode. Although Mary not marrying John would seemingly liberate the character and increase her autonomy, it still does not mend the fact that the character is increasingly marginalised and shown less as opposed to the original. Thus, little of the Victorian ideals represented in Mary – the passive woman; *the angel in the house* – are mended or changed; in this case purity and moral perfection are not placed and emphasis on anymore, yet the passivity remains. Also, the character has even regressed, as she is made less interesting and further marginalised.

Similarly, there was little if no development or changes made with the character Irene Adler in the episode “A Scandal in Bohemia” (1984). If anything, the position of the strong, proto-feminist character that Irene was in Doyle’s writings has deteriorated into a victim and ‘a damsel in distress’; this is demonstrated on two occasions. Firstly, as was mentioned before, “each episode begins, not with a Baker Street scene, but with a glimpse of the crime which Holmes will soon be investigating” (Redmond 177). However, “The Scandal in Bohemia” begins with the spies of the king of Bohemia rummaging the house of Irene in search of the photograph with which Irene blackmails the king, instead of depicting the actual object of investigation. This fact is suggestive of the king of Bohemia being portrayed as the criminal, rather than Irene – in this case, Irene would naturally be seen as the victim. Secondly, although she is for some parts described similarly as in the original – “she has a soul of steel. She has the face of the most beautiful of women, and the mind of the most resolute of men” – the ‘rough edges’ of Irene seem to be smoothed which again is suggestive of victimisation as she is made to comply with the Victorian ideals that Mary represented before (Doyle 150). For instance, in one scene, which is again straight from Doyle’s pages, Holmes disguises himself as a clergyman, gets injured in a fight, and Irene pleads the clergyman to be carried in her house. In the book, Holmes is tended by the maid, but in the TV series, Irene herself wants to take care of the injured man. Thus, Irene is portrayed as more sympathetic and tending, even motherly, as opposed to the ‘woman with a soul of steel’ that she was in the short-story. These factors portray Irene Adler rather as a damsel in distress than strong woman, which negates the feminist features that were given to Irene in the original. All in all, the adaptation heeds less attention to Irene’s features of ‘male psychology’, and focuses more on depicting her as a sensitive woman and a damsel in distress. Furthermore, the female characters’

position in general remains the same, as did Mary Morstan and Irene Adler. Evidently, as the TV series adaptation remains as faithful as possible to the original source, no changes are made to those plot developments which represent women as men's property.

3.2. Cultural Context

As was mentioned before, it is inevitable that the cultural context would contribute or interfere with an adaptation. Thus, two theories concerning the adaptation's cultural context function as possible explanations as to why the female characters were not developed here in any way, or were further marginalised and deteriorated. Firstly, Angela McRobbie points out that "[...] 1990 marks a turning point, the moment of definitive self-critique of feminist theory", which could explain the TV series' creators' indifference in developing the female characters and bettering their position (13). At that time, a movement called *new traditionalism* superseded the popularity and favourability of the feminist theory and was idealised in popular culture (35). Susan Flaudi describes the movement of new traditionalism as "the country-living nuclear family with a professional male breadwinner and a wife and mother who is apparently his equal, but who has chosen to stay at home" (qtd. in McRobbie 35). Additionally, Eric Link and Steven Frye define new traditionalism, specifically from the point of view of literary analysis, by saying that it

involves a declaration of the value of history, philosophy, and aesthetic and socio-political theory [...] Moreover, it recognizes the value of literary tradition while at the same time reconceiving tradition as an inclusive, rather than exclusive paradigm. (253)

Consequently, feminist characters were perceived as threats to "the lives of men and women who have chosen [...] the new traditionalism" (McRobbie 35). Thus, this could be the reason behind the deterioration of the characters Mary Morstan and Irene Adler, as well as the preservation of the Victorian ideals in terms of the female characters' position. Female characters would not be made stronger or more independent as the prevailing ideals considered those characteristics as threats and generally negative features for a woman to possess.

Secondly, McCaw argues that "the televisual imagining of Sherlock Holmes during the 1980s and 1990s in the UK [...] has a complex relationship with the 'Thatcherite' political rhetoric and ideology of the period" (36). McCaw defines 'Thatcherism' as:

an ideology that was, on one level, fundamentally concerned with themes such as ‘authority, law and order, patriotism, national unity [and] family [...] with an accompanying nostalgic rhetoric conjuring up an esteemed national past [...] (36-37).⁶

McCaw concludes that, as nostalgia and tradition were the dominating ideals of the time, “the nineteenth century, therefore, was to be imitated” (37). These theories – new traditionalism and Thatcherism – both place an emphasis on the past and traditions as idealised conceptions. Therefore, it is no wonder that the developments, which the feminist movement would have achieved so far, would be disregarded and ignored, as modern developments would be contradicting the aforementioned ideals. These attitudes are then arguably reflected in the Granada TV series.

3.3. Discussion

All in all, no improvement or significant developments were made in this adaptation concerning the female characters, but instead the female characters were regressed. The lack of development in terms of the female characters’ representation and position pose a severe backlash insofar as feminism is concerned. The creators of this series have chosen to remain oblivious to the important and problematic issues concerning the female characters which these Victorian writings deploy. As an opposing argument, one could refer to the fact that the series particularly aimed to fidelity in relation to the original source and that it is a valid approach when making an adaptation. However, refusing to address these issues which reflect the oppressed and discriminated position of women of the Victorian era could, in the worst-case scenario, mean that those conceptions are considered acceptable. Furthermore, although the creators insisted on fidelity, they were ready to make changes which further regressed the female characters’ position. This is suggestive of their attitudes towards feminism. Here fidelity as an approach to making an adaptation merely designates as a scapegoat; a means of escaping the responsibility and guilt of not addressing the issues which need to be

⁶ It should be acknowledged that as Thatcher herself was ‘paradoxical’ in that she was a woman working on a male dominated line of work, here the term Thatcherism is also used in a rather paradoxical sense, due to of the ambiguity of Thatcher’s political rhetoric. Although, according to Eric Evans, Thatcher was considered a reformer as “she changed the mindset of the nation”, Stephen Evans points out that “Thatcherism was quintessentially Victorian because its mindset was cast in the nineteenth century” (1; 601). The ‘Victorian’ lexicon “seems to have been an interchangeable term for the traditional and old-fashioned” although “Mrs. Thatcher’s traditionalism was [...] more a matter of style than of substance. [...] in one voice she regretted lost stability, in another she seized on what was new and developing” (Samuel 9, 10). Therefore, the term is in some cases used rather flexibly.

acknowledged and dealt with. Fidelity as an approach in making an adaptation in this case is blatantly disregarding the oppression and discrimination of women which these portrayals reflect.

4 Female Characters Modernised in *Sherlock* (2010-)

One of the latest Sherlock Holmes adaptations is *Sherlock* (2010-), which brings the Victorian detective to the 21st century. As opposed to the 1980s-1990s Sherlock Holmes adaptation, this adaptation does not have the tenacious aim towards fidelity. Although this adaptation is not a considerable departure from the original canon, it alters and modernises the Victorian ideals of the original, in particular the patriarchal norms concerning women's position. Thus, this modernisation certainly defines the progress of the series, as the female characters, too, are brought to the modern era. As the female characters have developed and the marginalisation of them has been distinctly addressed, it can be argued that the TV series' creators aimed to better the position and portrayal of the female characters. They have clearly acknowledged the feminist issues of the original short-stories and are overtly referring to them in particular in the episode "The Abominable Bride" (2016) and, for example, by depicting the male characters as damsels in distress, too, as "[...] Molly [...] and Mary [...] are credited with saving Sherlock's life, and John is identified as the "damsel in distress"" (Strosser 181). In addition to Mary and Molly, the character Mrs Hudson "has progressed from a character, who, quite literally, does not have a voice in the original Conan Doyle stories to a major influence in Sherlock's life [...]" (Strosser 186). Nevertheless, the means with which they attempt these improvements are sometimes ineffective and poorly designed, for instance in the case of Irene Adler.

4.1. Mary Reformed

Mary Morstan first appears in *Sherlock* in the episode "The Empty Hearse" (2014). As opposed to the original story, where she was introduced as a victim and a damsel in distress, here she is plainly introduced as John's fiancé. This as an introduction to the character is more neutral than the original and little assumptions of stereotypical representations can be drawn from this initial portrayal. At first, Sherlock does not pay much attention to Mary, as he is more concentrated on John. When Sherlock finally notices Mary, his deductions of her are "superimposed on the screen", and he deduces – among other regular things such as Mary is a cat lover – that she is clever, a guardian, disillusioned, and a liar (Strosser 190). These traits, save her being a liar which is rather a sign of what is to follow, certainly give an impression of a strong woman, rather than a weak and victimised woman. In addition, Mary is presented as a reconciling party; when John is angry with Sherlock for not telling him that he is still alive, Mary takes the side of Sherlock. Instead of

prompting John and Sherlock to divide, she urges them to reunite. For instance, when John and Mary are alone in the cab and John is frustrated with Sherlock, Mary simply notes that she likes Sherlock. Charla R. Strosser argues that “it would be easy for the show to set Mary and Sherlock up as adversaries, but instead they are written as equals or potential teammates” (190). The function of this feature, according to the creators of the series, is to indicate that Mary is not “a “drag or a “ball and chain”” as well as presenting Mary as a part of the group and the male characters’ equal (qtd. in Strosser 190).

In the original canon Mary was represented as the passive angel in the house – a domestic woman whose only purpose is to take care of her husband. Here, on the contrary, Mary’s character has been given much more function beyond a domestic nurturer and a plot device. Similarly, Strosser notes that “Mary Morstan takes on a more active role in *Sherlock* than she ever did in the canon” (189). Mary participates in the cases of Sherlock and Watson and “she does not allow herself to be sidelined. She is a part of the team” (Strosser 190). For instance, in the episode “The Sign of Three” (2014) Major Sholto’s life is threatened and he quickly retreats to his hotel room. John and Sherlock follow him, and John says to Mary to “stay here”. Nevertheless, Mary follows them, and as the two protagonists are having trouble remembering the number of Major Sholto’s room, Mary quickly comes to their aid and takes them to the room. Another example is of the episode “His Last Vow” (2014). In the beginning of the episode, John is going to fetch their neighbour’s son from a ‘crack den’, Mary then decides to join him and John protests that “you can’t come, you’re pregnant”. Nonetheless, Mary holds her ground and argues that “you can’t go, I’m pregnant” and she joins John. Furthermore, as was mentioned before, Mary is credited with saving both John’s and Sherlock’s life at least once during the series. In “The Empty Hearse” Mary is the one that notices that John is in danger by decoding a text-message which initially seems like a spam message. As a result, Sherlock and Mary rush to save John. Additionally, in “His Last Vow” Mary, in a way, saves Sherlock by shooting him so that he would not die of the shot, but it would be enough to hospitalise him, which Sherlock referred to as “surgery”. Thus, although Mary is also portrayed as a victim, for instance in the episode “His Last Vow”, those characterisations are equally shared by both of the male protagonists. Also, although Mary dies in the episode “The Six Thatchers” (2017), the character is still not completely eliminated as she sticks through the remaining episodes either as John’s hallucination or a narrator on a video tape she left for Sherlock to watch.

Moreover, Mary is more versatile than she was originally. In Doyle’s writings, she is not given a history of her own and little is told about her life in the present. In this adaptation, a complex history starts to unravel in the episode “His Last Vow” as John and Sherlock find out that Mary is

an ex-assassin. Thus, it can be certainly argued that the character is more interesting than she was originally. Similarly, Strosser points out that “Mary is fun. She is clever [...] she is presented as an action hero of sorts” (190). Despite these features which would have been considered as ‘masculine’ in Victorian terms, Mary still possesses some characteristics which are traditionally ‘feminine’, such as maternity. As these two kinds of features co-exist in the same character, it indicates that the ‘feminine’ features do not eliminate her being equally capable as the male characters. Moreover, no such differentiation between ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ features is made or overtly indicated in the series to begin with.

4.2. Irene Adler and Over-Sexualisation

In the original short-story “A Scandal in Bohemia” Irene Adler was portrayed as a proto-feminist character and as the so called New Woman. Here, on the other hand, the creators of the series fail in their attempt to adapt Irene to the 21st century as they place her agency entirely on her sexuality, thus deteriorating the character from a feminist perspective. Irene first appears in the episode “A Scandal in Belgravia” (2012) and is presented as a dominatrix, or as Mycroft phrases it, ‘a sex worker’. In Doyle’s writing, Irene blackmails the king of Bohemia with compromising letters, and in this adaptation, she blackmails the state of England with compromising photographs of her highly esteemed clients. Irene is seemingly a feminist character: she is certainly someone with ‘a resolute mind’ and ‘a soul of steel’. Strosser, too, points out that “on the surface, perhaps, Adler should not be so upsetting to feminists. She is strong and independent [...]” (188). Here, the over-sexualisation of the character is used as a token of her independence, freedom, and liberation. However, Andrea Kirchknopf argues that “such exclusive focus on her sexuality leads to the loss of her character’s feminist potential” (152). This portrayal of Irene Adler as ‘a sex worker’ objectifies her and deteriorates the character into a clumsy refashioning of a former feminist character. Angela McRobbie also points out that an aggressive and highly sexualised depiction of a female character is “playing a vital role in the undoing of feminism” (5).

In addition to the ‘dubious and questionable’ portrayal which results in objectification, her agency suffers a backlash as well. Antonija Primorac argues that Irene Adler’s “agency [...] becomes increasingly more limited” or better yet, the episode “diminishes” it (93, 100). In the original, she protests to the inequality of women and men by dressing as a man, as well as with her intellect as she outwits Sherlock. Here, on the other hand, she manages to baffle Sherlock for a few seconds by appearing naked when the two first meet, so that Sherlock is not able to make any deductions of her

as he usually does so by looking at a person's clothes. However, Irene's intellectual dominance over Sherlock ends there, pointing to the limited agency. Instead of outwitting Sherlock, Irene distinctly develops into a damsel in distress, as Kirchknopf also argues that "the witty, self-assertive Victorian woman becomes gradually transposed into a helpless woman in despair" (147). In the very end of the episode, Irene is kneeling, wearing a hijab and about to be beheaded. This depiction reflects, perhaps, the lowest point of submission that a woman might deteriorate into, especially when seen from the point of view of the Western world. From a Eurocentric perspective, the hijab represents submission. In addition to the hijab, the symbolism of kneeling also represents submission and the act of (almost) being beheaded speaks for itself. Thus, the strong feminist character is oppressed under the power of men. Although Irene is not executed, it does not better the situation, as Irene does not save herself as would be characteristic for the strong and independent female character, but rather she is saved by the 'knight-errant' Sherlock Holmes. Herein, she is portrayed as a damsel in distress quite overtly. Primorac argues similarly:

As soon as she 'over-reaches' her limits of agency as a sexualised body, Adler promptly falls/fails, is humiliated and punished. Hence, in her last appearance in the episode, she is reduced to the most oppressed image of the female body in Western media: that of the hijab-wearing (Muslim) woman, waiting either to die or to be rescued by a male hand. (103)

Consequently, the highly sexualised depiction of Irene, in reality, does not have any further function than representing sexual liberation, and it regresses the dimension and agency of the character, rather than improving it, as was mentioned before. Therefore,

despite Adler's job as a dominatrix, *Sherlock* makes her a "damsel in distress," suggesting that her role as a dominatrix has nothing to do with strength and everything to do with female objectification. (Jones qtd. in Strosser 188)

Nevertheless, despite the limited agency and objectification, it can surely be said that this interpretation of the character is more interesting than the original character, as Strosser argues that "she is certainly stronger, more interesting, and more admirable than her predecessor" (189). Yet, little value can be placed on being 'interesting' deeming the refashioning of the character as undoing feminism.

This excessive focus on female sexuality, according to Marie-Luise Kohlke, is characteristic to neo-Victorian fiction, which 'obsesses' "with "exhibiting" the underside of nineteenth century propriety and morality, a sensationalised world of desire and novelty, where any sexual fantasy might be

gratified” (1). A phenomenon or theory that in this adaptation particularly goes hand in hand with neo-Victorianism is new Orientalism. Instead of presenting another culture as the unexplored ‘other’, those characteristics are addressed to a time-period, in this case the Victorian era. Kohlke argues that

In an ironic inversion, the Victorian age that once imagined the Orient as seductive free zone of libidinous excess in its literature, architecture, and arts, itself becomes Western culture’s mysterious eroticised and exotic other. (12)

This concept explains, although does not justify, Irene’s over-sexualisation in this adaptation.

4.3. The Position of the Female Characters

As to the female characters’ position in general, this adaptation has done improvement by clearly addressing the feminist issues, although the means of improving might in some cases be ineffective or a bit graceless. One of the ways, in which the female characters’ position was bettered, was by adding more of them. Although this seems a rather simple solution and “it is short-sighted to pretend that simply adding more female characters makes a show feminist”, still it is some improvement, and the ratio of female characters to male characters is more balanced (Radish qtd. in Strosser 180-181). This affects the marginalisation of female characters which was clearly an issue in the original short-stories. An example of an additional female character would be Molly, who sticks through all four series. This, according to Strosser, “is a testament to the creators’ willingness to adapt the character and Sherlock’s relationship with women” (187). In addition to lasting as long as the original protagonists, Molly is portrayed as, perhaps, the most important female friend of Sherlock’s. When Sherlock has to fake his own death in the episode “The Reichenbach Fall” (2012), Molly is the first person he turns to in need of help and “ultimately Molly [...] saves Sherlock from Moriarty” (Strosser 187). Moreover, when John refuses to work with Sherlock in the beginning of the episode “The Empty Hearse”, Sherlock asks Molly to work with him as a substitute for John, although he could have asked a male character, for instance Lestrade, for help. Furthermore, the episode “The Abominable Bride” is where the creators address the feminist issues most overtly. The episode is set in the Victorian time as Sherlock is hallucinating of a case that is parallel to the case of Moriarty seemingly coming back from the dead. In this episode, the female characters criticise their marginalisation and limited function and they “strain at the gender conventions inflicted on their characters” (Strosser 185). For instance, in the beginning of the

episode Mrs Hudson criticises John's stories, because she never says anything in them and "protests as being a mere "plot device"" (Porter 30). In addition to Mrs Hudson, Mary shows annoyance for being left home. When Sherlock and John are leaving to investigate a case, Mary objects by saying "I don't mind you going, my darling, I mind you leaving me behind".

In the episode, Mycroft wants Sherlock to confirm his assumption about an existing 'enemy', but he does not want Sherlock to defeat it, because according to Mycroft, "this is a war that we must certainly lose". By saying 'war', Mycroft is referring to the feminist movement and the women who oppose the inequality between women and men of the Victorian era. At the end of the episode, Sherlock "admits that the "women I, we, have lied to, the women we have ignored, disparaged" have a right to be angry" (Strosser 185). This indicates that "the writers' intentions are good [...]" (Strosser 185). Despite good intentions, the writers still stumble in their aims, as "the Victorian victims of male abuse are revealed to be a secret cabal of murderous suffragettes" dressed "in purple KKK robes" (Strosser 181, 185). The feminist movement being compared to a violent movement which promotes oppression and discrimination certainly deserves its share of critique. However, when the adaptation, and this episode in particular, is analysed as a whole, it can be argued that this is more a blunder than an intentional attack towards feminist values.

To conclude, the writers and creators of this series clearly tried to better the female characters' position, yet "these character adaptations are sometimes shallow attempts at feminism" (Strosser 181). The most significant improvements were, perhaps, that the female characters were certainly more interesting and their increased agency; the female characters are able to "understand and "handle" Sherlock, when the male characters [...] cannot" and this "is a testament to their stability, intellect, and agency" (Strosser 185). Furthermore, Strosser refers to the issue of female characters being portrayed as damsels in distress by saying

Arguing that a show is anti-feminist because a female character is rescued by a male character who is also the titular hero of that show misses the point. The point of the show is that Sherlock, at least the modern iteration, is loyal and protective of his friends regardless of whether those friends are men or women. (186-187)

Therefore, the show is certainly not anti-feminist, although further improvement in the means of referring to feminist issues could be done.

5 Conclusion

This study aims to point to the manifestation of patriarchal structures in the original *Sherlock Holmes* as well as – to some extent – in the two adaptations, *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* and *Sherlock*. I aim to examine the characters Mary Morstan and Irene Adler in particular throughout all chapters, because they create a distinct contrast as ‘the dream role’ and ‘the nightmare role’. By examining these two polar ends it is possible to determine what are the ideals concerning women and what attitudes do those ideals reflect.

In conclusion, the patriarchy is demonstrated primarily through the marginalisation and limited function and agency of the female characters and the general inequality between the female and male characters. Firstly, Doyle’s stories distinctly portray patriarchal structures with the means of either depicting a female character merely as a victim or having the only strong female character defeated, and portraying the female characters as the male characters’ property. Secondly, the female characters of *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* are regressed as a result of a general backlash of feminism and idealisation of tradition during that time. Lastly, the BBC *Sherlock* adaptation improves the status of the female characters – addressing issues such as marginalisation, stereotypes and passivity of the female characters – although sometimes failing in applying feminist values effectively.

Although the ‘phallogocentrism’ and patriarchal structures of detective fiction and Victorian fiction has, perhaps, been rather thoroughly studied, some of the Victorian classics – in this case *Sherlock Holmes* – are being adapted on screen where they reach larger audiences than the original stories, therefore they are in need of examination. However, this study is only a brief discussion of a few examples and many other Sherlock Holmes adaptations have been recently aired, such as the TV series adaptation *Elementary* (2012-). Thus, further and more extensive studies are required on this topic.

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