“A MERE APPENDIX”:
THE RECLAIMING AND DESEXING OF SHERLOCK HOLMES

By

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by

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“A MERE APPENDIX”: THE RECLAIMING AND DESEXING OF SHERLOCK HOLMES

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This study questions the aptness of recent critical tendencies to view Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes as preeminently an upholder and enforcer of normative masculine and heterosexual values. While the character’s eventual importance as a policeman of hegemonical gender and sexual codes is granted, close reading of the first three stories suggests that Doyle originally conceived of his detective as gender-problematic and sexually deviant. The Sherlock Holmes novels A Study in Scarlet and The Sign of Four and the short story “A Scandal in Bohemia” form a progression in which the moral character of Holmes is shifted: from a troublesome and ambiguous marginality to a position closer to the moral center. In this attempt to “reclaim” his character for the moral right, Doyle is only partially successful. The Otherness that sets Holmes apart as a noteworthy novum also prevents his conversion into a standard hero figure, resulting in a sexless and even body-less character.
INTRODUCTION

Perhaps it is an indication of the “crisis of masculinity” noted by Harry Brod (in Kimmel, 267) that male fictional characters become so much more complex in the Late Victorian period: not so easily pigeon-holed into the century’s various masculine paradigms such as the Carlylean hero or Kingsley’s Muscular Christian, and more likely to exhibit contrary (and contradictory) characteristics. If the mid-century had seen a diversified spectrum of masculine representations in fiction--the lower class rogue of the Newgate novel, the aristocratic dandy of the Silver Fork novel, and the staunch middle class heroes of Dickens, to name a few--the waning century frequently saw the attributes and tendencies of these seemingly distinct types intermixed and conflated, often with problematic results. Stevenson dramatically depicts the coexistence and conflict of a man’s higher and lower natures in Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, a late century novel which upholds Peter Stearns’ observation that it is as “a constant contradictory struggle” that we are to understand masculinity, and not merely as “the privileged position within a power disequilibrium” (qtd. in Kestner 16). An inquiry into masculinity, or even masculinities (as Sussman, Kimmel, Messner and others usefully pluralize the term), is a discourse necessarily concerned with contradiction; this must be especially so for the late century, when “the waning of Victorianism, the emergence of the ‘New Woman’, [and] the continuing impact of industrialization, urbanization” so greatly contributed to “the male malaise” (Brod, qtd. in Kimmel 267). Elaine Showalter’s conclusion regarding the period, and its diversity of masculine inscriptions, sums it up best: “. . . masculinity is no
more natural, transparent, and unproblematic than ‘femininity’. It, too, is a socially constructed role, defined within particular cultural and historical circumstances, and the fin de siècle also marked a crisis of identity for men” (qtd. in Barsham 106).

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick further characterizes the late nineteenth century as an era of “homosexual panic,” in which male homosociality is figured as “the most compulsory and the most prohibited of social bonds” (87, 114). “Men must bond if the purposes of imperialism are to be fulfilled,” writes Diana Barsham of Sedgwick’s thesis, “but face the possibility of losing their privileged masculine designation if they do so too intimately” (60). Sedgwick’s theorizing of this “strangling double bind” (Barsham 60) corresponds with Brod’s depiction of masculinity in flux, and also with the conflation of masculine types within individual characters so prevalent in the literature--but Sedgwick’s ideal genre for the depiction of homophobia, the “paranoid Gothic,” is one which affords no paradigm of hero to negotiate and reconcile the dilemma. The “eschatological harrowings and epistemological doublings” (Sedgwick 114) of the later Dickens novels or Wilde’s Dorian Gray (and also Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde) successfully depict the puzzle without realizing a masculine paradigm to solve it.

Such a paradigm is Doyle’s amateur detective Sherlock Holmes. Introduced in the decade which witnessed the Trafalgar Square Riots, Jack the Ripper, The Bitter Cry of Outcast London and other signifiers of “British social instability” (Kestner 11-12), Sherlock Holmes retained an immense popular following throughout the Edwardian era and beyond, due in part to his ability (as a detective) to uphold the social order. But the reasons for his popularity go beyond this. Far from exploding the masculine paradigms theorized during the era, Holmes celebrates them all, managing to move from one form to
another with a seamless grace. A character rife with contradictions, Holmes is ideally suited to organize and reconcile differing models of masculine behavior, yet also to interrogate and ultimately police normative masculine values. Despite his role as “the policeman of masculinity” (Kestner 87), however, Holmes’ masculinity is itself problematic; his singularity, Other-ness and contradoriness (or nonconformity), the very qualities which make him infinitely adaptable to differing conceptions of maleness, also open him to suspicions of transgressive sexuality.

My present argument is to show that, despite his being an active promoter of traditional masculine and chivalric virtues, Conan Doyle originally (perhaps necessarily) conceived of Holmes as a potential sexual deviant. When interest in the character won him a wider readership, Doyle attempted to “reclaim” his creation for the moral right—attempted, because the reclamation is incomplete. Holmes is introduced to readers as a novum, a creature so extraordinary that it requires the John Bull clichés of a Watson to mediate and explain him—the problem: how to endow this creature with novel and exceptional traits without introducing ambiguity as to his sexual behavior. Doyle creates this complex dilemma for himself in the first Holmes narrative, *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), due in no small part to his source material. As I will argue, Doyle’s troublesome solution is to desex Holmes, attempting to exalt his mentality by erasing his body. The privileging of the mental over the physical and emotional that results is tantamount to a masculine-feminine hierarchy, enabling the character to exemplify an iconic and representative masculinity. However, the ambiguity remains: by portraying Holmes as an extraordinary mental Other, Doyle allows space for speculations as to his character’s physical, emotional and sexual Otherness as well. In the first novel he simultaneously
avoids and investigates the dilemma by couching the narrative in the trappings of conventional masculine adventure stories. He only confronts it—though problematically—in the next two stories, *The Sign of Four* (1890) and “A Scandal in Bohemia” (1891), by firmly establishing his narrator’s heterosexuality and by casting Holmes in the unlikely role of chaste Romantic hero. Following these stories, Holmes’ sexuality and indeed his very physicality gradually becomes a conspicuous non-issue, as Doyle begins the slow process of erasing the body. In the end, neither Holmes’ status as an incorporeal “calculating machine” (Doyle, *Memories* 108) nor his advocacy of normative masculine values can allay speculations as to his sexual Otherness.
DOMESTICITY AND THE ARMCHAIR DETECTIVE

The Holmes-Watson partnership is situated, necessarily, within the sphere of
domesticity. The sanctum sanctorum of 221B Baker Street is a vital component of the
novel situation which Doyle wishes to describe in the first story: namely, that of a
“consulting” or “armchair” detective. “I have a trade of my own. I suppose I am the only
one in the world. I’m a consulting detective,” explains Holmes in A Study in Scarlet,
an explanation that simultaneously emphasizes both the novelty of his vocation and its
location in the domestic sphere (19). In his attempt to understand his roommate’s
revelation, Watson further stresses these ideas: “But do you mean to say . . . that without
leaving your room you can unravel some knot which other men can make nothing of,
although they have seen every detail for themselves?” (20, emphasis mine).¹ From the
beginning of the canonical stories, then, Holmes is differentiated from conventional
detectives by his location outside the professional sphere: “Here in London we have lots
of Government detectives and lots of private ones. When these fellows are at fault, they
come to me . . .” (20). Indeed, his status as an “amateur,” albeit a gifted one, becomes the
chief objection of professional or official detectives to his “interference” in the canonical
mysteries.

¹ Shortly before Holmes’ revelation, Watson characterizes Holmes’ anonymous magazine article “The
Book of Life” as being the work of “some arm-chair lounger who evolves all these neat little paradoxes in
the seclusion of his own study” (19). Ineffectuality is thus clearly associated with domesticity, by the
dominant masculine voice of the story: the seclusion of the study is no substitute for practical experience
outside of the home, and residents of the armchair cannot write The Book of Life. Holmes’ declaration that
he is an armchair detective seeks to dispel this notion by linking two unlinkable ideas: the (masculine)
professional and the (feminine) homebody.
As the series continues, this distinction lessens, with Holmes increasingly taking an active investigative part in the cases, and only solving one mystery entirely from his sitting room (“A Case of Identity”). Nevertheless, the stories are based at 221B. Holmes’ flat is the locus of both his private and public life—the location of his criminal library, the lab where he conducts chemical analysis, the offices where he receives clients. 50 of the 60 stories have their beginning at Holmes’ “humble quarters,” while only four do not depict them at all.

Therefore, Holmes and Watson do not interact in a professional theatre merely, but also and perhaps primarily in a domestic one. This is entirely in keeping with Doyle’s later claim that the stories—with their high percentage of failed cases, escaping criminals, and innocent actions mistaken for crimes—are not meant to be great detective stories, but stories about a great detective. They are an account of how a gifted amateur lives his life, in which personal habits and domestic rituals are just as important as the obligatory puzzle to be solved. Given Watson’s role as companion, observer and chronicler, Holmes understandably refers to him as his “Boswell,” without whom “I am lost” (“Scandal” 10). Yet Watson also lives with Holmes, shares his meals, learns his routines, interprets his moods. Even after his marriages, Watson is a regular figure at Baker Street, while the nonlinear timeline of the tales reinforce the notion that marriage has scarcely interrupted the pair’s domestic habits.² Such a relationship not only establishes Holmes as the object of Watson’s Foucauldian gaze, but also must necessarily constitute one of those “certain intense male bonds . . . not readily distinguishable from the most reprobated bonds”

² It is worth noting that the meccas of pilgrimage for Sherlock Holmes fans—the Sherlock Holmes Museums in London and in Meiringen, Switzerland—each painstakingly recreate the domestic quarters of Holmes and Watson as their central exhibit. At the 1951 Festival of Britain, designer Michael Weight’s recreation of the Baker Street sitting room proved a highlight of the exhibition (Eyles 99).
which Sedgwick refers to as provoking “homosexual panic” (88-89). Even without the presence of Watson at Baker Street, the situating of Holmes within a private and exclusive domestic sphere feminizes his character, thereby aggravating suspicions of transgressive sexual habits.

For Joseph A. Kestner and others, Doyle alleviates homosexual tension in the stories by fashioning Holmes into a “policeman of masculinity,” thwarting homosexual sexual liaisons between potentially transgressive males through the tropes of criminal and criminal agent (87). A representative case for Kestner is the early story, “The Red-Headed League,” and its “notorious” interpretation by Samuel Rosenberg as a thwarting of anal intercourse (86). Kestner appears to reject Rosenberg’s psychoanalytic inferences (a hunting crop and “the hanging balls” of a pawnbroker’s shop figured as phallic symbols, travel by underground as anal intercourse), but he accepts the central point “that [the villain of the story] constitutes a threat to the dominant masculine order and that he is thus policed by Holmes” (86-87).

In her recent critical inquiry into Doyle’s masculine thought, Diana Barsham also aligns Holmes with Doyle’s other “reworkings [of] dominant masculine archetypes”, Professor Challenger and Brigadier Gerard, reserving for Holmes the privileged position of “Doyle’s most inspired diagnostician of breaches and vulnerabilities in the modern domain of the masculine sign” (1). It is an interesting juxtaposition, in that a comparison of Holmes with Doyle’s other serial characters tends to reveal more difference than likeness. The hero of The Lost World and The Poison Belt, Professor Challenger is only nominally an intellectual. The “scientific romances” in which he is featured were inspired by the romping, rugged adventure novels of Rider Haggard--the emphasis of the tales “is
on the quest motif, not on science . . . Science is merely the peg on which adventure hangs” (Jaffe 91-92). Brigadier Gerard is both the hero and the narrator of a series of stories about the Napoleonic Wars, a grizzled campaigner who has been wounded no less than seventeen times, and who “describes himself as a type of manhood always lost from one generation to the next” (Barsham 168). Although Gerard’s braggart mannerisms and “narcissistic blindness” serve to satirize conventional heroism (Jaffe 67) and French chauvinism, his stories are tributes to a romanticized age of military adventure, and celebrations of “a masculinity of polished steel” (Barsham 167).

Holmes is clearly the odd man out in this triumvirate. While Challenger is a continent-hopping adventurer and Gerard a distinguished soldier, Holmes is an armchair detective, securely rooted in the domain of the domestic (albeit an all male domestic sphere, not dissimilar to the London club scene in its exclusivity). I do not dispute the claim that Holmes is an enforcer of the masculine codes. It is certainly reasonable to assert that Holmes is a champion of the social--hence, the sexual--order, since this assertion reinforces the notion that detective literature is intrinsically concerned with reinstating or preventing deviations from the status quo: proving that “the individual is capable of repairing the rupture in the moral order” (Kaemmle 58). But this role becomes obvious only over the course of many stories, and (more relevant to my present argument) it is a role enacted solidly within the public sphere of Holmes-as-detective; it is not a role indigenous to the confines of Holmes’ (or Holmes’ and Watson’s) cozy domesticity at 221B Baker Street. From the privacy of his shared quarters, Holmes is outspoken in his criticism of conventional heterosexual relations, an attitude most often expressed in his disdain for the female sex. At Baker Street Holmes tells Watson,
“Woman’s heart and mind are insoluble puzzles to the male”; at Baker Street he insists that “their most extraordinary conduct may depend upon a hairpin or a curling tongs” (“The Illustrious Client” 112, “The Second Stain” 303). When Watson announces his engagement in The Sign of Four, Holmes groans from his armchair “I feared as much . . . I really cannot congratulate you . . . I should never marry myself, lest I bias my judgment” (118-119). Holmes later characterizes Watson’s marriage as “desertion,” “the only selfish action which I can recall in our association” (“The Blanched Soldier” 151). It is hard to imagine so misogynistic a character, or one so opposed to marriage, to be the clear-cut paradigm for normative masculinity that Kestner and Barsham allege. On the contrary, an exclusive homosocial relationship with Watson within the confines of Baker Street appear to be his ideal. In “The Final Problem” he emphasizes the seriousness of Professor Moriarty’s threat on his life by telling Watson “They set fire to our rooms last night”--for Holmes they are still “our” rooms, though Watson is married, and tells the reader “the very intimate relations which had existed between Holmes and myself [had become] to some extent modified” (249, 259).
THE “TAINT” OF POE’S DUPIN

The private domesticity of the mise en scene and an exclusive homosocial relationship, together with other problematic features such as a marked Other-ness and nonconformity, are built into the Holmes matrix from the outset, inherited by Doyle from his working model: Poe’s three Auguste Dupin stories. Whether Poe wished to establish an air of cosmopolitan sophistication by situating his detective and unnamed chronicler in Paris’ Faubourg St. Germaine, or whether he was simply following his usual practice of setting his Gothic “grotesques” in locales unfamiliar to and distant from his American readership, the French bohemian surroundings of Dupin combine with other features in the stories to produce a novel, but morally ambiguous, effect. Stephen Peithman points out that Dupin’s name hints at an aristocratic family and heritage, making Paris’ left bank “an ideal neighborhood” for him, “not only an aristocratic area but also a haven for students and artists” (199-200).

Although Doyle establishes Holmes and Watson in the staunch respectability of London’s Bloomsbury, the free-thinking and potentially revolutionary connotations of the left bank’s “students and artists” resonate in Holmes’ character, as does more than a hint of aristocratic elitism.¹ Like Holmes, Dupin has withdrawn from the world in order to cultivate the mind and sharpen his deductive and analytical skills. He might have

¹ On the one occasion in the canon when Holmes discusses his family, he confirms that his ancestors were “country squires,” and that his grandmother was the sister “of the French artist, Vernet,” adding that “Art in the blood is liable to take the strangest forms” (“Greek Interpreter” 193). These few remarks bear out the connection in Doyle’s mind between Holmes and Dupin/Left Bank Paris, although he is careful to associate Holmes with the “squire-archy,” perhaps to avoid connotations of a dissolute aristocracy.
remained alone, an eccentric but gifted recluse, had not Poe needed a narrator for his tale; indeed, one of the principal innovations of the first Dupin story, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” is the establishment of the “intermediary as narrator” into the detective story, a device by which the author may keep the reader in suspense without requiring the sleuth either to withhold information or to sound self-congratulatory (Peithman 195). In order to avoid the pitfalls of his earlier experiments with the form, then, Poe brings a narrating and observing male into close proximity with another male, the extraordinary object of his gaze. In a later detective story, “The Gold Bug,” Poe’s narrator is a visitor to the island of the “detective,” William Legrand, who is shocked and appalled at his host’s “lunatic” behavior as Legrand attempts to discover buried pirate gold on the island (275). Far from being a visitor or acquaintance of Dupin’s, the narrator of “Rue Morgue” seems infatuated, even smitten with his subject:

Our first meeting was at an obscure library . . . where the accident of our both being in search of the same very rare and very remarkable volume brought us into closer communion. We saw each other again and again . . . I was astonished, too, at the vast extent of his reading; and, above all, I felt my soul enkindled within me by the wild fervor, and the vivid freshness of his imagination . . . I felt that the society of such a man would be to me a treasure beyond price; and this feeling I frankly confided to him. (200)

The diction of Poe’s narrator in this passage and elsewhere is that of a lover, and, after the fashion of a lovesick young man whose finances are “somewhat less embarrassed” than his lover’s, he is “permitted to be at the expense” of renting and furnishing his and Dupin’s rooms in Paris (200). J. A. Leo Lemay postulates that, as the narrator is either an Englishman or an American, “a common assumption would be that the narrator is there for a sexual fling,” given “the nineteenth-century American image of Paris” (171). The two men then follow a largely nocturnal existence, Dupin being “enamored of the night for her own sake; and into this bizarrie, as into all his others, I
quietly fell; giving myself up to his wild whims with a perfect abandon” (201, emphasis Poe’s). Lemay remarks that “the connotations of the diction . . . suggest that the narrator submits to--and relishes--the strange sexual practices of Dupin” (172).

In sharp contrast to the horrified surprise and suspicions of lunacy we find in the narrator of “The Gold Bug,” Dupin’s chronicler aligns himself with his idol even in lunacy, and jealously guards their domestic situation against any encroachment:

Had the routine of our life at this place been known to the world, we hould have been regarded as madmen--although perhaps, as madmen of a harmless nature. Our seclusion was perfect. We admitted no visitors. Indeed the locality of our retirement had been carefully kept a secret . . . We existed within ourselves alone. (200)

It is from such a conflicted and feminized Other, and such a dubious and potentially transgressive homosocial relationship, that Conan Doyle chiefly draws his inspiration for Holmes, Watson, and 221B.

Although Doyle was more likely to cite his old professor, Joseph Bell, as the primary inspiration for Holmes, he makes no secret of his debt to Poe in the text of the novel. “You remind me of Poe’s Dupin,” Watson tells Holmes in Chapter Two of A Study in Scarlet, adding “I had no idea that such individuals did exist outside of stories” (21). Holmes does not receive the comparison with good grace, deploring in particular Dupin’s “mind-reading” feat in “Rue Morgue.” Yet he makes frequent use of altered versions of Dupin’s deductive maxims; like Dupin, he openly disparages the official representatives of the law, peppers his speech with Gallicisms and quotations from the classics, and in “The Cardboard Box,” even employs the same trick of mind-reading he had previously criticized. These similarities are merely the result of Doyle’s too exact imitation of his source, and need concern us no further. To my purposes here, the most significant feature inherited by Holmes from Dupin is a constitutive and problematic
effeminacy. Dupin’s nationality, his aristocratic background, his scholarly erudition, his eccentricity, his interiority, his absolute and self-imposed seclusion within a domestic setting and his penchant for nocturnal wanderings throughout the sleeping city are all elements that find their way into the delineation of Holmes’ character, serving to mark him with similar connotations of sexual abnormality. The “taint” of the implied homosexual relationship in “Murders in the Rue Morgue” thus passes into the Holmes narratives from the beginning, certainly infecting the eccentric Holmes, if not the mundane Watson.
As I have argued above, Holmes’ role as masculine champion becomes apparent over the course of many stories. While it is easy for posterity to look back on the completed canon and affirm Holmes’ purpose as masculinity’s policeman, it would have been far less obvious to the first readers of the stories in the years 1887-1890. It is certainly not a role immediately confided to the reader of the first Sherlock Holmes story, A Study in Scarlet, the first two chapters of which detail Watson’s own muddled attempts to deduce the occupation of his fellow lodger. Watson’s observations do not enable him to ascertain Holmes’ profession, but they are laden with sexually transgressive hints. Holmes is visited by and entertains all manner of “nondescript individuals” in the privacy of the sitting room (17). Recalling Dupin’s nocturnal jaunts, Watson notes that Holmes’ long walks through London “appeared to take him into the lowest portions of the city” (13). He also suspects Holmes of using narcotics, forging a link between the detective and the decadent aesthetes that would become more emphatic in the second book. Watson’s inclination simply to ask Holmes is curbed when “something in his manner showed me that the question would be an unwelcome one” (16). A second attempt at directly inquiring about his occupation fails when Watson concludes “that he [Holmes] had some strong reason for not alluding to it” (18). Doyle thus begins the first account of his great detective by enshrouding the detective himself in mystery, creating for the reader an ambiguous empty space in which deviant sexuality may exist. As I will argue, it is a vacuum that is never fully occupied.
In his later years Doyle was fond of quoting a Cornish fisherman who told him that Sherlock Holmes was “never quite the same man” after his alleged death at Reichenbach Falls and his subsequent “resurrection” due to popular demand (Eyles 44). However truly the remark might apply to the post-Reichenbach Holmes, it is certainly true of Holmes after A Study in Scarlet. In many ways, the ambiguous resonances and connotations derived from Dupin are never so strongly evident as here. Two additional attributes—still traceable in Dupin, but never developed—have the effect of further feminizing Holmes, at least by Victorian standards: a nervous energy seemingly approaching hysteria at times, and an excessive vanity, usually revealed by the haughty, conceited mannerisms of the stereotypical prig. Finally, the puzzle to be solved in Scarlet is not entirely consistent with his perceived function as the policeman of masculinity.

*A Study in Scarlet* is a story of love, revenge, and murder. Baldly summarized, it concerns the efforts of Jefferson Hope, an American tracker and frontiersmen, to track down and punish the two men responsible for the rape and murder of his betrothed, Lucy Ferrier. The manliness and courage of Hope, a true hero of romance, is contrasted with the sensuality and ribaldry of Lucy’s murderers, two members of the Mormon “cult.” In what would become a common trope in the Holmes stories, the victims are criminals themselves, whose undoing is justified and, in some cases, providentially abetted. Holmes’ task in the conventional mystery portions of the story is to locate the killer by

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1The remark’s charming unsophistication does not disguise the fact that it is an indictment of Doyle’s waning creativity and interest in his most popular character. Doyle maintained that his creativity had not diminished, but that interesting puzzles for Holmes to solve were finite, and a certain sameness was bound to creep into any new stories; he kept the disgruntled remark alive because it justified his own misgivings about reprising the series (Eyles 44).
the application of deductive methods, although a sizable section is also given to the introduction of his remarkable person and to the establishment of the domestic setting at Baker Street.

In his first story Holmes’ appearance is delayed for half a chapter; while still offstage he is described by an acquaintance as eccentric, a bit cold-blooded, “a first-class chemist,” having “amassed a lot of out-of-the-way knowledge,” possessing a “passion for definite and exact knowledge,” and exhibiting a moody personality which we now recognize as manic-depressive: “not a man that is easy to draw out, though he can be communicative enough when the fancy seizes him” and “He either avoids the place [the chemical laboratory at St. Bartholomew’s Hospital] for weeks, or else he works there from morning till night” (7-8). The attributes described are familiar enough to readers even slightly acquainted with the character through the popular iconography. But these characteristics are accompanied by other details that do not jibe with Holmes’ received image of a cultured, respectable and chivalrous public servant.

For the first and only time in the canon Holmes is described both as a young man and as a student--actively engaged in studies at “Bart’s,” though neither Watson nor Stamford, who introduces them, can surmise his field of study (when seeking to discover his fellow lodger’s occupation in the second chapter, Watson declares emphatically “He was not studying medicine” (14)). Holmes’ uncertain station at the hospital is never revealed to his readers, but his apparent youth suggests that Doyle initially conceived of Holmes as another Dupin: a “young gentleman” (Poe, “Rue Morgue” 199), an eccentric, 2

2As many critics have noted, his reasoning is more accurately described as “abductive,” proceeding from particular results to the formation of a particular hypothesis.
a bachelor, capable of erratic and socially transgressive behavior. Stamford’s only specific comment regarding Holmes’ activities at Bart’s provides the first hint that his transgressive behavior may include sexual perversion: Holmes’ passion for knowledge “may be pushed to excess. When it comes to beating the subjects in the dissecting-rooms with a stick, it is certainly taking rather a bizarre shape” (8). When combined with Holmes’ delay on the scene and Stamford’s ominous warnings to Watson (“You don’t know Sherlock Holmes yet . . . perhaps you would not care for him as a constant companion” and “You mustn’t blame me if you don’t get on with him”(7-8)), this shocking piece of information prepares the reader to meet a social anomaly and a sexual misfit. While these expectations are never explicitly confirmed, Holmes’ appearance on the scene and his behavior throughout the novel reveal an array of characteristics which Doyle would later modify or purge from the detective altogether.

One such characteristic is a nervous excitability not found in the later Holmes, who tends toward taciturnity and reserve. Watson takes exception to his impetuosity, which is rendered in both childish and effeminate terms. Upon his and Stamford’s arrival in the laboratory, Holmes:

sprang to his feet with a cry of pleasure. ‘I’ve found it! I’ve found it,’ he shouted to my companion, running towards us with a test-tube in his hand. ‘I have found a re-agent which is precipitated by haemoglobin, [sic] and by nothing else.’ Had he discovered a gold mine, greater delight could not have shone upon his features. (9)

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3In later stories (“The Gloria Scott” and “The Musgrave Ritual”) Holmes will relate to Watson adventures of his youthful student days as events far in the past and prior to their meeting.

4Although Stamford immediately provides a quasi-scientific explanation for this act--”to verify how far bruises may be produced after death”--it is entrapped within a discussion of “excess” and the “bizarre” which invalidates its rationality (8). Stamford enforces the impression that Holmes is engaging in deviant behavior when he adds, sensationally: “I saw him at it with my own eyes” (9). In any case, Holmes’ store of “out-of-the-way knowledge” should have alerted him that this experiment had already been conducted, in 1828 during the Burke and Hare trials (Edwards 143-144).
Holmes demonstrates his new scientific discovery while “clapping his hands, and looking as delighted as a child with a new toy”; “Beautiful! beautiful!” he cries to himself, while “His eyes fairly glittered as he spoke, and he bowed as if to some applauding crowd conjured up by his imagination” (10). Later in the story Holmes again “[springs] from his chair with an exclamation of delight” (60) upon the discovery of new evidence. When one of his theories is checked his excessive nervousness makes him the object of Watson’s pity: “. . . the utmost chagrin and disappointment appeared upon his features. He gnawed his lip, drummed his fingers upon the table, and showed every other symptom of acute impatience. So great was his emotion that I felt very sincerely sorry for him” (62). Eventually, Holmes discovers the counter to the check “with a perfect shriek of delight” (62).

Such heightened emotional states are highly incongruous for a character constructed as “a calculating machine” (Memories, 108); indeed, Doyle’s diction in these scenes and elsewhere in Scarlet is identical to that of later characters in the canon whose nerves, in Kestner’s view, have “unmanned” them (104). Kestner’s particular example of a male figure emasculated by his nervousness is Percy Phelps from “The Naval Treaty”. He describes Phelps, a writer in the Foreign Office and the nephew of a Lord, as:

a male prone to nervous breakdowns, depression and perhaps paranoia. As such it raises serious questions about the ability of the upper classes to govern the nation and emphasizes the problem of race degeneration . . . The temperament of Percy Phelps records a national apprehension about the stability of males. (105)

To underline this point, Kestner references Mosse’s commentary on the perception of nervous disorders in the late century: “Hysteria had previously been confined to women as a sign of their tender nerves and barely controllable passions. Nervousness, after all, was the very opposite of masculinity” (105). Kestner sees the story as being
about “the loss and recuperation of masculinity, with Holmes being the agent of resecuring the penis/phallus equation of normative masculinity”(105). It is striking, then, that Holmes--whose steely nerves contrast with those of his “shrieking” client in “The Naval Treaty,”--should exhibit many of the same behaviors in his first narrative outing. It is especially significant that Watson, who has returned from his campaign in Afghanistan with “shaken nerves,” is yet master of himself enough to pity his friend’s hysterical outbursts.

While Doyle would frequently depict Holmes either as lacking in social graces or preferring not to bother with them, the Holmes of A Study in Scarlet seems unbearably overconfident in his abilities of observation and deduction, and never tires of prattling on about them to whomever will listen. It may come as a shock to readers who know Holmes and Watson only through their pop culture manifestations to find Watson--far from adoring his friend’s abilities and expressing his amazement--petulant and irritated by Holmes’ unceasing self-congratulation. “This fellow may be very clever,” thinks Watson in Chapter Two, “but he is certainly very conceited” (21). When Watson attempts to compliment his new friend by comparing him to Dupin and Gaboriau’s Lecoq, Holmes “sniffed sardonically,” pronouncing Dupin “a very inferior fellow . . . very showy and superficial,” and Lecoq “a miserable bungler” (21). Regarding the latter fictional detective Holmes is particularly boastful and self-congratulatory: “That book made me positively ill. The question was how to identify an unknown prisoner. I could have done it in twenty-four hours. Lecoq took six months or so. It might be made a text-book for detectives to teach them what to avoid.” (21)
Watson, “annoyed at this bumptious style of conversation,” attempts to change the topic by commenting on a man in the street, visible from the window. When Holmes deduces that the man is a retired Marine sergeant, Watson’s unspoken thoughts are virulent: “‘Brag and bounce!’ thought I to myself. ‘He knows that I cannot verify his guess’” (22).

Interrupted by an urgent summons from Scotland Yard Inspectors Lestrade and Gregson, Holmes is surprisingly catty, alleging that the two official detectives “are as jealous as a pair of professional beauties,” and declaring petulantly “I’m not sure about whether I shall go . . . Supposing I unravel the whole matter, you may be sure that Gregson, Lestrade, and Co. will pocket all the credit” (24-25). Such an attitude is a far cry from Holmes’ self-effacing declaration later in the canon that “my profession is its own reward” (“Speckled Band”174), or Watson’s admiring testament that his friend “lived for his art’s sake” and seldom claimed “any large reward for his inestimable services” (“Black Peter” 127). Further, Holmes’ indecisiveness about joining the investigation is rooted solely in spite—he had been lamenting the absence of a challenging puzzle earlier in the same scene. Again, the behavior is antithetical to the more familiar Holmes, who flies into action at the first appearance of any worthy problem.

The overbearing vanity of Scarlet’s Sherlock Holmes is frequently revealed in such pettiness and arbitrariness, but at least once he is compared to the feminine in unambiguous terms. When Watson compliments him on his having raised detection to an exact science in Chapter Four, his reaction is memorable: “My companion flushed up at my words, and the earnest way in which I uttered them. I had already observed that he was as sensitive to flattery on the score of his art as any girl could be of her beauty” (36).
The circumstances of this most unequivocally feminine simile are worth noting: for Holmes, the “science of deduction” is an art, and the cultivation of his faculties touch upon his tenderest emotions. In time, this privileging of the mental over the physical functions will replace sexuality in his character--nullifying the reader’s suspicions of sexual deviance, but only partially. This will be Doyle’s incomplete solution.

It seems obvious that the first Sherlock Holmes story is mystery fiction; this is only partly true. Half of the book is given over to a long flashback set in the rugged deserts of Utah, an adventure narrative peopled with hardy frontiersmen and treacherous Mormons (Brigham Young makes an appearance in this mini-historical novel), and related in the third-person by an unnamed narrator. For all this segment’s unpopularity with readers, the removal of focus from the grimy streets of London to the open air of the American West relieves much of the claustrophobic tension brought by the pettishness of Holmes and the rivalry of the Scotland Yarders. There is a distinct impression of purity in these scenes which counters the oppressiveness of the investigation’s dirty streets and bloody details. The shift in mood is intentional; though unnecessary to the resolution of the mystery story, which could be just as easily wound up in a few pages of exposition, it is Doyle’s way of breathing life into a conflicted atmosphere. The third-person narrator can imbue the actions of Jefferson Hope with the most basic and celebrated manly virtues, and the type of raw chivalry associated with Sir Walter Scott and Fenimore Cooper. As such, it is part of a larger scheme at work in Scarlet to import elements of traditional masculine adventure narratives into a story fraught with gender uncertainty.

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5 Doyle considered his historical romances to be among his “more serious literary work” (“Preface” to The Casebook 4). Perhaps he preferred them for the opportunity they afforded of painting vivid and unambiguous, because historically distant, masculine characters.
Doyle’s efforts to “purify” the masculine category can also be seen in the novel’s opening pages, which briefly recount Watson’s military career. Though he actually sees few engagements, he modestly reports that he is a survivor of the Battle of Maiwand. Critics have made much of the fact that the battle was a notorious defeat for the British; therefore, Watson’s involvement in the action expresses anxiety about the future of the Empire. Kestner correctly notes that the battle “generated the stuff of legend, despite being a defeat,” though he de-emphasizes its relevance in A Study in Scarlet, stressing instead the psychological significance of Watson’s wounding (22). A reference to Maiwand would call to mind to Victorian readers the best and most heroic qualities of British manhood in the face of adversity: the dauntless courage of the light brigade, and a suitable proving ground for Watson. By including such references to adventure stories and military actions, Doyle masculinizes the gender-problematic atmosphere of Scarlet, just as he “sterilizes” it with the trappings of science, analysis, and medicine (the laboratory at St. Bartholomew’s, for example). By choosing to engage a military surgeon as narrator rather than, say, a soldier or an officer, Doyle brings both an adventurous warrior and a detached, clinical observer into the mixture--both tropes being strategies to tone down the troublesome aspects of Holmes’ effeminacy and his close homosocial relationship with Watson.

As critics have rightly noted, the mystery-puzzle proper of Scarlet is an interrogation of the institution of marriage, as are many of the early Holmes stories. Inspector Lestrade’s taunt from “The Noble Bachelor” may be taken as paradigmatic for many of these adventures: “‘There,’ said he, putting a new wedding-ring upon the top of the pile, ‘There is a little nut for you to crack, Master Holmes’” (234). The bonds
between Jefferson Hope and Lucy Ferrier are held to be more precious than the
sanctioned bond between Lucy and Enoch Drebber, an elder of the Mormons who has
taken Lucy to be one of his many wives. Although Doyle’s narrative is invested in
constructing Drebber to be a profligate, Holmes’ official task is to apprehend and bring to
justice an admirable and heroic suitor, one who is operating within the accepted bounds
of normative heterosexual behavior. He is also working to avenge Drebber, a practitioner
of both heterosexuality and hyper-heterosexual degeneracy; either way, his undertaking is
at odds with and challenges conventional masculine and heterosexual norms. As Hope’s
pursuer he is not policing masculinity but punishing it; as Drebber’s avenger he is
indirectly vindicating an exponent of sexual deviation.

Finally, both Drebber’s and his secretary Joseph Stangerson’s bodies are
discovered with the word “RACHE” written above them on the wall, in letters of blood.
The discovery is considered to be of the greatest significance to Inspector Lestrade, who
theorizes that “it means that the writer was going to put the female name Rachel, but was
disturbed before he or she had time to finish. You mark my words, when this case comes
to be cleared up you will find that a woman named Rachel has something to do with it”
(31-32). Holmes quickly dispels the suggestion by informing Lestrade that “rache” is “the
German for ‘revenge’; so don’t lose your time by looking for Miss Rachel” (34). In the
end Hope confesses that he has read an American newspaper account of “a German
being found in New York with RACHE written up above him, and it was argued . . . that
the secret societies must have done it. I guessed that what puzzled the New Yorkers
would puzzle the Londoners” (120).
Not enough attention has been paid to this episode in the novel, which must be taken as some sort of reading instruction, clearly depicting as it does the writing of text, and revealing (albeit in another language) the true motive for the murders. Perhaps the most striking element of the scene is Lestrade’s provisional theory, which is so immediately dismissed by Holmes. Owen Dudley Edwards, taking a cue from the omnipresent display of erudition in the story, compares Lucy Ferrier with the Biblical Rachel, paying particular attention to Roman Catholic Christmastide litany from Matthew, with which Doyle would have been very familiar (165). Seeing a connection between “Rachel weeping for her children” (Matthew 2:18) and the innocent victim Lucy Ferrier, Edwards concludes that “Lestrade, in a way, was quite right” (165). Diana Barsham focuses on the absent letter “L” rather than the completed name, calling it the “letter of linkage in A Study in Scarlet” and connecting it not only with Lucy Ferrier but also with Louise, the name of Doyle’s first wife—a not improbable allusion in a text so concerned with marriage. I would call attention not to the letter itself, but to the fact that it is missing, i.e. “purloined”; as such it is a clear reference to Poe’s “The Purloined Letter,” the third and final story about Auguste Dupin.6

Of the three Dupin stories “The Purloined Letter” is the only one to feature a situation of comic rivalry between the detective and the official police inspector, a dynamic familiar to readers of the Holmes stories, and with which Lestrade in particular came to be associated. Stephen Peithman links the story’s puzzle and denouement to Doyle’s “The Second Stain,” since both stories feature a missing letter (a document) that

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6 Wilkie Collins’ “The Stolen Letter” (1854) is a possible but less likely source, since it is highly derivative of Poe’s story and what Peithman calls “a fairly direct steal [from Poe]” (299).
eventually turns up “right under everybody’s nose” (299). To be sure, the tale—which concerns the theft of an incriminating letter and the Prefect of Police’s unsuccessful attempts to retrieve it—ultimately argues that an answer can be hidden “in plain sight”. Dupin compares his successful investigation to a parlor game—a “game of puzzles” that is:

“. . . played upon a map. One party playing requires another to find a given word—the name of a town, river, state, or empire—any word, in short, upon the motley and complex surface of the chart. A novice in the game generally seeks to embarrass his opponents by giving them the most minutely lettered names; but the adept selects such words as stretch, in large characters, from one end of the chart to the other. These . . . escape observation by dint of being excessively obvious . . . the physical oversight is precisely analogous with the inapprehension by which the intellect suffers to pass unnoticed those considerations which are too obtrusively and too palpably self-evident.” (310, emphasis mine)

The dictum of “The Purloined Letter” is that an obvious truth can escape detection by virtues of its being “excessively obvious” and “too palpably self-evident” (310). The evidence need not be ingeniously secreted in a hiding place (as it is in “The Second Stain”). It can be found just where one expects to find it; in this case, the incriminating letter is found in a card rack on a mantelpiece, a “hyper-obtrusive situation . . . full in the view of every visit[er] [sic]” (311).

The lesson here corresponds with an earlier utterance of Dupin’s, from “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” Comparing his investigative techniques to the best method of viewing the stars and planets, Dupin argues that “By undue profundity we perplex and enfeeble thought; and it is possible to make even Venus herself vanish from the firmament by a scrutiny too sustained, too concentrated, too direct” (209, emphasis

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7 It may also be linked to “The Naval Treaty”, a study of the “loss and recuperation of masculinity” according to Kestner (105).

8 Sherlock Holmes keeps his own correspondence on the mantelpiece, according to “The Musgrave Ritual.”
mine). The erotically-suggestive inclusion of Venus in this passage indicates that, to paraphrase Dupin, sexually significant information can be overlooked if it is looked upon too closely—or, to incorporate the lesson of “The Purloined Letter,” information about sexuality (such as an individual’s sexual orientation) can hide in plain sight.

If “L” is the letter of linkage in *Scarlet*, as Barsham argues, why might it not stand for matters of “love” and “lust”? Why not for Madame and Mademoiselle L’Espanaye, the alleged mother and daughter murdered in Poe’s *Rue Morgue*, and whom Lemay contends are homosexual lovers, a relationship which mirrors or doubles that of Dupin and his chronicler (173-174)? The missing letter which Lestrade notes, and which Holmes hastily directs his attention away from, may indicate the obvious, “self-evident” deviance of Holmes’ sexuality. While it would be entirely in keeping with an intellectual giant like Holmes to overlook obvious sexual matters by the “undue profundity” of his thought, a less recondite thinker like Lestrade would indeed note the obvious. In other words, because he is less accomplished intellectually (he does not understand German), Lestrade fails to see the solutions of the mystery (“rache” or revenge), but he does recognize the obvious sign that matters of sexuality have been concealed—in plain sight, as it were. The missing letter does not point to the criminal, then, but to Dupin, and so to Holmes. Lestrade is indeed “quite right”, then.

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9 The confusion over language is itself an allusion to “Rue Morgue”, in which a plenitude of witnesses mistake the grunting of an ape for different foreign languages.
The publication of *A Study in Scarlet* in Beeton’s Christmas Annual attracted little attention in England, but a stir of interest from America led to the commission of a second Sherlock Holmes story, to be published in the American magazine, *Lippincott’s*. Doyle was busy writing another novel at the time, the historical romance *The White Company*, which he always held to be his best book (Jaffe 8). Despite his distraction and the quickness of composition, however, the second novel turned out to be more cohesive. Absent is the long and disruptive flashback sequence of *Scarlet* and the cumbersome third-person narration. Instead, Doyle weaves elements of military and adventure narratives directly into the fabric of the story, relying heavily on Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* in particular. The presence of *Scarlet*’s fussy, feminized Sherlock Holmes in this atmosphere of stolen treasure, mutilated villains and exotic locales would indeed have sounded an incongruous note; this is surely one reason for the evident “sea change” in his characterization. Kestner also provides alternative reasons for the novel’s construction of “a masculinity in the nature of Sherlock Holmes different from the scientist of *A Study in Scarlet*”: chiefly, the sensation of the Jack the Ripper murders in 1887, and the appearance of William Booth’s *In Darkest England and the Way Out*, a “study of urban malaise” in which England is depicted as being “as frightening as one of its colonies” (58). But while the liberal application of Stevensonian motifs and situations may indicate Doyle’s concern for the status of manhood in the Empire, it does not transform Holmes
into a suitable hero of romance; the character is still problematic and ambiguous in *The Sign of Four*, though he has perhaps exchanged some of the old marks of potential transgressiveness for new ones.

Many critics (Christopher Roden, Harold Watson and Owen Dudley Edwards, among others) have noted the similarities between Stevenson’s groundbreaking book for boys and *The Sign of Four*. I will not reiterate their arguments here, but will simply note that Doyle’s tribute to so important an exponent of boy’s adventure fiction itself speaks for his investment in the inculcation of normative masculine values and the establishment of male paradigms. Kestner confidently declares that “Doyle’s use of details from *Treasure Island* in the novel aligns it with male adventure narratives as part of a masculinist literary tradition” (59). While there is certainly a great deal of truth to this assertion, I will argue that *Four’s* increased masculinist value owes more to the marriage of its narrator than to its recapitulation of the themes of traditional adventure narratives.

As in the first novel, the mystery plot of *The Sign of Four* depicts the murder of a man who, to some degree, deserved his fate. It is another tale of *rache*: of revenge from the past overtaking a worthless and guilty man. Whereas the crimes of Enoch Drebber had been of sexuality, however, the crime of Major John Sholto is of avarice (and, implicitly, of racism), a motivation more consistent with the trappings of boyhood romance. From his post at a penal colony in India he absconds with the Agra Treasure, a collection of fabulous jewels that he obtains in partnership with a fellow officer and four prisoners. One of these titular “four,” Jonathan Small, traces Sholto to England where together with his aboriginal “chum,” Tonga, he hopes to avenge his deceased cohorts and recover the treasure. Small’s appearance on the scene and the dexterity and skill of the
pygmy-sized Tonga bring about the deaths of both Sholto and one of his sons (the greedy one), Bartholomew.

Holmes, who had referred to himself as “the most incurably lazy devil that ever stood in shoe leather” in Scarlet (25), proves to be more of a pendulum in his moods here, providing the first clear evidence of his manic-depression. Caught up in the excitement of a new case, Watson describes him as “bright, eager, and in excellent spirits, a mood which in his case alternated with fits of the blackest depression” (17). Work, it is here established, is the deciding factor in his moodswings. He does not work for money nor public applause, but for the mental stimulation of the work itself. His rant to Watson at the novel’s opening has become famous:

My mind . . . rebels at stagnation. Give me problems, give me work, give me the most abstruse cryptogram or the most intricate analysis, and I am in my own proper atmosphere . . . But I abhor the dull routine of existence. I crave for mental exaltation. (4)

It is the beginning of the mental-physical hierarchy that will prove so vital a component of the later “reclaimed” Holmes, a privileging of the cerebral and the rational that will eventually equate intellectual abilities--not with waspishness or effeminacy--but with power and masculinity.

But in Four, Holmes’ restless “craving” for mental distraction has its dark side as well. Watson had dismissed his suspicions of Holmes’ drug use in Scarlet, concluding that “the temperance and cleanliness of his whole life [forbids] such a notion” (13). The Sign of Four begins with an image designed to shock the reader into a new, and terrifying, knowledge of Sherlock Holmes, one that challenges Watson’s claims of “temperance and cleanliness” and introduces a set of different, if no less disturbing, variables into his character:
Sherlock Holmes took his bottle from the corner of the mantelpiece, and his hypodermic syringe from its neat morocco case. With his long, white, nervous fingers he adjusted the delicate needle, and rolled back his left shirt-cuff. For some little time his eyes rested thoughtfully upon the sinewy forearm and wrist, all dotted and scarred with innumerable puncture-marks. Finally, he thrust the sharp point home, pressed down the tiny piston, and sank back into the velvet-lined armchair with a long sigh of satisfaction. (3)

The slow, measured languidness of Holmes’ drug use in this scene, as well as his general torpor and existential cynicism throughout Four “stresses his outre status by developing him into an aesthete, a figure of the fin-de-siecle decadence” (Kestner 60, emphasis his). Significantly, the demons that drive Holmes to indulge in mind-altering drugs are the same that led him to “create” his profession, “for I am the only one in the world” (4). The logic is questionable: a restless intellectual who depends on new mental challenges, yet who lounges in his home, waiting for the police to get “out of their depths” and consult him (4). The dynamic of driven specialist and “incurably lazy devil” is already proving problematic; Doyle responds by changing Holmes from a shrieking eccentric who bows to imaginary crowds and shortles over his own achievements, to a tortured and fragmented recluse, a genius sighing over his own degeneration and the meaninglessness of life without “stimulation.”

Holmes seems to have aged ten years between the two novels, though his comments on “the Jefferson Hope case” lead us to believe they are contiguous (5). ¹ It is hard to imagine this sunken and pathetic figure leaping about the laboratory at St. Bartholomew’s, or beating corpses in the dissecting room for his own edification. He seems a spent force, a victim of his own idiosyncrasy who, in true decadent fashion, lives

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¹In terms of the convoluted Sherlockian chronology--always troublesome, since Doyle was never over concerned with continuity--Holmes has aged years. Doyle haphazardly inserted more than a dozen of the later stories between these two novels, perhaps seeking to make maximum use of Holmes’ and Watson’s less complicated bachelor partnership.
solely for the moment of “mental exaltation”--whether that moment comes in the form of new work or cocaine and morphine. “I cannot live without brainwork,” he complains,

What else is there to live for? Stand at the window here. Was ever such a dreary, dismal, unprofitable world? . . . What could be more hopelessly prosaic and material? What is the use of having powers, doctor, when one has no field upon which to exert them? Crime is commonplace, existence is commonplace, and no qualities save those which are commonplace have any function upon earth. (11)

The chapter which depicts Holmes in this Hamlet-like mood, frustrated and disgusted with the world he views from above, is entitled “The Science of Deduction”--ironically, Doyle uses the same title in Scarlet for the chapter that introduces us to Holmes’ abilities and profession. As Kestner notes, Holmes links “his indulgence . . . with a declaration of his profession” (61). Implicitly, these are the conclusions which he has deduced from the world: that life is prosaic drudgery, and that only drug use or the distractions of his work (his “art,” as he frequently calls it) can relieve his mental and physical ennui. What had been merely a means of providing “bread and cheese” in A Study in Scarlet (18) is now Holmes’ only salvation--the apex of his moodswings, desperately sought after, the only thing to live for.

The indulgence in cocaine introduced in Four fixes Holmes as a creature of mood, as well as of mind. Yet he seems less a character of caprice than of control, one who does not lack the emotion or desires that bubble over in Scarlet but suppresses them, a move that at once romanticizes and masculinizes his character. Without Stamford’s grave misgivings about him or Watson’s speculations about his long walks into the lowest parts of the city, there is relatively little room for conjecture as to his sexual identity. But the drug use itself is rendered in an onanistic mode: the “long, white” fingers, the fetishism of the leather and the needle, the sharp thrust home, the “long sigh of satisfaction” (3). Holmes is both penetrator and penetrated in the opening scene, a needle-phallus dynamic
that expresses hints of impotence and sexual inadequacy: it is a “delicate needle,” a “tiny piston” being manipulated by his “nervous fingers.” Narcotics are clearly figured as a substitute for both work and sex at the novel’s end:

“The division seems rather unfair,” I remarked. “You have done all the work in this business. I get a wife out of it, Jones gets all the credit, pray what remains for you?”

“For me,” said Sherlock Holmes, “there still remains the cocaine bottle.” (119)

Such an equation of drug use with a degenerative masturbation may explain its declining presence as the series continues. By the time of “The Missing Three-Quarter” (1904) it has become a “sleeping fiend” that Watson watches for, a habit that he has “gradually weaned” his friend from embracing (243). Perhaps the most significant reference to Holmes’ drug use after this occurs in “The Dying Detective” (1913). It is a scant reference: Watson notices syringes among a “litter of pipes, tobacco-pouches . . . penknives, revolver cartridges and other debris” on Holmes’ mantelpiece (142). Yet it is significant because the story seems to find Holmes wasting away under the influence of a deadly infection, “a deplorable spectacle” with a “gaunt wasted face . . . a hectic flush upon either cheek . . . his voice . . . croaking and spasmodic” (139). His erratic behavior causes Watson to lament “Of all ruins that of a noble mind is the most deplorable,” recalling Holmes’ Hamlet soliloquy by the window in Four. Clearly, drug use is a herald of degeneracy and death in the stories; its parallel association with “abnormal” sexuality such as masturbation suggests that the frankly indulging Holmes of The Sign of Four is a decadent in his prime, rushing swiftly down the path towards degeneration and madness. The deviant of Scarlet has not been expelled, but he is beginning to pay the price for his sexual transgressions.
Regarding normative sexuality, Four finds Holmes at his most misogynistic, assuring Watson that “the most winning woman I ever knew was hanged for poisoning three little children for their insurance-money” and insisting that “women are never to be entirely trusted—not the best of them” (45). He fails to appreciate the attractiveness of his client (and Watson’s future wife) Mary Morstan, prompting Watson to call him “an automaton” and “positively inhuman” (15); his grudging compliments to her at the novel’s close are entirely concerned with her utility and intellect. His privileging of the utilitarian and the mental over the emotional here² is indeed the beginning of the mind-body hierarchy that in time works to desex (and dehumanize) him completely, yet it is also a hark back to Poe’s Dupin.

Writing of Dupin’s peculiar naiveté in “Murders in the Rue Morgue,” J. A. Leo Lemay persuasively argues that “Dupin is himself the astronomer unable to see Venus because his scrutiny is too abstract”; hence, he misconstrues the “obvious” explanation for the Rue Morgue murders—rapes committed by a sex maniac—into a logical, but preposterous, solution (178-179). Holmes also is in danger of overlooking “obvious” motives of love and lust in his investigations as his body is erased by his creator.³ By the end of the canon, Holmes is able to announce, theatrically: “I am a brain, Watson. The rest of me is a mere appendix” (“Mazarin Stone” 7). The remark is in response to a remonstrance from Watson about his fasting. The appetite for food, then, may also stand

² A client is to me a mere unit, a factor in the problem. The emotional qualities are antagonistic to clear reasoning” (15).

³ Watson remarks at one point that “He was likely . . . to fall into error through the over-refinement of his logic” (Four 74).
in for the sexual appetite in the stories--included in the category of “appendix” are both
the stomach and the penis.

In a further effort to leave behind the Holmes of the first novel, *The Sign of Four*
introduces a new “enervated” and effeminate character in Thaddeus Sholto by way of
distraction. The surviving son of Major Sholto and his brother’s identical twin,
Thaddeus’s nervous laughter, twitching movements, and constant indulgence in his
hookah mark him as a sort of gross parody of Scarlet’s Holmes (while his physical
appearance evokes Oscar Wilde, suggests Vincent Starret 14-15). He greets Mary
Morstan with Holmes-like remarks that emphasize both his artistic temperament and his
domesticity: “Pray step into my little sanctum. A small place, miss, but furnished to my
own liking. An oasis of art in the howling desert of South London” (22). His flair for
theatricality reveals itself in his sudden and startling announcements and in his choice of
a rendezvous: “the third pillar from the left outside the Lyceum theatre” (14). He is given
to quoting Gallicisms like Dupin and the Holmes of Scarlet (30), and carries his
restorative potions and “quack nostrums” in a leather case (31).

It is a common interpretive move to view Thaddeus Sholto as an effeminate
weakling, dismissed by Holmes and barely tolerated by Watson. Barsham sees him as “a
peculiarly repulsive hypochondriac, his aestheticism “transformed into handsomeness
only by what he does in trying to right the wrongs of Miss Morstan and by his moral
resistance to his twin brother’s greed” (121). For Kestner he recalls Oscar Wilde and
Algernon Swinburne, while his mannerisms and red hair link him with John Clay from
“The Red-Headed League,” “meant to evoke decadent aestheticism if not a stereotype of
the homosexual in the culture” (86). I suggest he is rather more; partaking of the old
Holmes’ troublesome features but lacking any of his redeeming qualities, Thaddeus Sholto serves as a measuring stick by which the reader may judge the new, more masculine Holmes. Where Holmes is “rather over six feet, and so excessively lean that he seemed considerably taller” (Scarlet 14), Thaddeus is continually described as “the little man.” He is as self-absorbed as the Holmes of the first novel, but with his own fragile health rather than superior intellect and abilities. Where Holmes possesses “a strength for which I should hardly have given him credit” (Scarlet 9), he is too weak and unnerved to mount a flight of stairs on his own (36). As twins, Thaddeus and Bartholomew Sholto are but one instance of the “doubling” that occurs throughout the narrative (Farrell 41-41, Kestner 60), yet Holmes is also a twin of these twins. When Bartholomew is found dead in a makeshift chemical laboratory before a table “littered over with Bunsen burners, test-tubes, and retorts” (37) the scene bizarrely echoes Holmes’ first appearance in Scarlet, both in physical setting and in name (St. Bartholomew’s Hospital / Bartholomew Sholto). In short, while Four’s Holmes does not lack markers of potentially transgressive behavior, his masculinity can only gain in comparison with the mincing caricature of Thaddeus Sholto.

Perhaps realizing that he could only alter his detective so much without creating an entirely new character, Doyle sets about bolstering the masculinity of Watson in The Sign of Four. As stated above, the unnamed third-person narrator of Scarlet is missing, granting a new authority to Watson’s voice. Gone also is the sub-titular hierarchism of Scarlet, “Being a reprint from the reminiscences of John H. Watson MD,” implying that only his meeting and involvement with Holmes is worth reprinting from Watson’s much larger memoirs. The narrative shift reveals Doyle’s general intent to imbibe Watson with
a new vitality and purpose in *Four*; he is not only the observer of this adventure but also a participant, and not merely a participant but also the teller of the tale. His stated purpose in bringing the events of *A Study in Scarlet* before the public had been to reveal Holmes’ ingenuity and skill, but when Holmes criticizes the work in *Four*, Watson is “irritated by the egotism which seemed to demand that every line of my pamphlet should be devoted to his own special doings” (5).

Watson describes himself as “a lonely man” at the beginning of *Scarlet*, and includes himself among the “loungers and idlers of the Empire” who naturally gravitate toward London (6). His education and military career, dispensed with in two short paragraphs, have nothing of the heroic or manful about them: he receives his degrees and is attached to his regiment in “Candahar” where he is promptly wounded, “struck down by enteric fever” and sent back to England (5). “The campaign brought honors and promotion to many,” he complains, “but for me it had nothing but misfortune and disaster” (5). His role in the Jefferson Hope case is solely that of an observer, a tag-along whom Holmes invites “if you have nothing better to do” (25). In contrast, *Four* finds him playing a variety of masculine roles. “As a medical man” he warns Holmes against the harmful effects of his drug use, taking personal responsibility for his health (4). He takes an active part in every facet of the investigation, providing Holmes with a medical opinion as to the cause of Bartholomew Sholto’s death, accompanying him on a bloodhound chase, firing his pistol alongside Holmes’ to bring down Jonathan Small’s dreaded cohort, Tonga. The final pursuit of Small he compares to a high-spirited hunt, remarking: “I have coursed many creatures in many countries during my chequered career, but never did sport give me such a wild thrill as this mad, flying man-hunt down
the Thames” (86). The impression which builds over the course of the narrative is of a well-traveled and hearty old soldier, one with tales to tell. It is a deliberate shift in character: the reader of *Scarlet* is familiar with Watson’s “chequered career” prior to meeting Holmes, and there seems little in it to remember fondly. Yet he endeavors to “cheer and amuse” his future wife with “reminiscences of my adventures in Afghanistan” (20) and mentions his experiences of gold-mining communities in Australia off-handedly (35). Even the inexplicable migration of Watson’s war wound, from his shoulder to his leg, adds to the impression of tried and true masculinity. Instead of the convalescent and luckless product of Maiwand’s disaster, he becomes the limping ex-officer brandishing a heavy walking stick, a seasoned veteran.⁴

For perhaps the only time in the stories, Watson truly has a story of his own to relate: that of his courtship of and marriage to Mary Morstan, the daughter of Captain James Morstan, John Sholto’s confederate. *The Sign of Four* thus aligns itself with the traditional domestic novel by building toward and ending with a marriage. It therefore ends with an implication that Holmes and Watson are now following separate paths: Watson towards a respectable, healthy and normal life, Holmes down the slippery slope of degeneration. By firmly establishing his narrator within a sanctioned heterosexual relationship, Doyle attempts to “remove the curse” from the Holmes-Watson partnership.

The courtship subplot of *Four* is the stuff of sentimentality and ritual; the scenes sit uneasily next to the hard facts and scientific deductions of the investigation, recalling Holmes’ sarcastic criticism of *Scarlet* at the opening: “You have attempted to tinge it with romanticism, which produces much the same effect as if you worked a love-story or

⁴ Watson’s handicap also sets up another favorable comparison or “doubling” in the novel, between the crippled army doctor and Jonathan Small, the wooden-legged army prisoner (Kestner 63).
an elopement into the fifth proposition of Euclid” (5). There is scattered talk of chivalry
and romance between the couple during their rushed courtship, with Mary pronouncing
Holmes and Watson “two knight-errants to the rescue” (71). The importance of a
traditional and normal domestic scene to Watson is revealed by his wistful remark in
Chapter Seven, regarding the home of Mrs. Forrester: “It was soothing to catch even that
passing glimpse of a tranquil English home in the midst of the wild, dark business which
had absorbed us” (49). With Mary safely installed in such a scene, she is able to inspire
Watson into new feats of bravery and sacrifice from Watson:

The treasure . . . or part of it, belonged rightfully to Miss Morstan. While there was
a chance of recovering it, I was ready to devote my life to the one object. True, if I
found it, it would probably put her forever beyond my reach. Yet it would be a
petty and selfish love which would be influenced by such a thought as that. If
Holmes could work to find the criminals, I had a tenfold stronger reason to urge me
on to find the treasure. (65)

Nevertheless, he is frankly relieved when it is lost in the Thames. Despite his own
guilt over the matter, even this ill wish could be construed as manful and noble by the
reader, stemming from his love and desire for Mary: “I did not know how this Agra
treasure had weighed me down, until now that it was finally removed. It was selfish, no
doubt, disloyal, wrong, but I could realize nothing save that the golden barrier was gone
from between us” (93). Watson’s masculine integrity benefits from his “selfish, no doubt,
disloyal” wishes; he has no desire to be perceived as “a mere vulgar fortune-seeker”
attempting to “take . . . advantage of an intimacy which chance had brought about” (49).

Though the romantic subplot reveals a sentimental side of Watson, it is worth
noting the shrewdness, pragmatism and indeed professionalism that motivate his
courtship as well. As a retired army surgeon on half-pay, it behooves him to find a wife
as soon as possible if he wishes to start a private practice. The mainly female clientele of
the Victorian general practitioner would be “reticent to seek advice from a bachelor medical man” (Peterson 92). In his 1857 survey of English professional vocations, *The Choice of a Profession*, Henry Byerley Thomson goes so far as to declare a wife “almost a necessary part of a physician’s professional equipment” (162). Watson is unwilling to leech off a vulnerable heiress’s good fortune, then, but he is mindful enough to consider his own financial and professional prospects, even during the hurly-burly of a murder investigation.

In short, this Watson is a far cry from the passive, convalescent and weak narrator of *Scarlet*, who writes:

> The reader may set me down as a hopeless busybody, when I confess how much [Holmes] stimulated my curiosity . . . Before pronouncing judgment, however, be it remembered how objectless was my life, and how little there was to engage my attention. My health forbade me from venturing out unless the weather was exceptionally genial, and I had no friends who would call upon me and break the monotony of my daily existence. (14)

In *The Sign of Four*, Watson’s roles as doctor and police surgeon, companion and advisor, wife-wooer, “hunter,” and, above all, narrator repudiate such apologetic excuse-making. He is not so caught up in an unhealthy fixation with Holmes, but manfully looks after his own professional affairs in order to provide for his new wife, thus avoiding the folly of Dupin’s chronicler. In fact, the novel’s no-nonsense Watson--possibly the closest thing to an unequivocal “hero” figure to be found in the stories--is perhaps the most persuasive evidence for Owen Dudley Edward’s assertion that “Scott gave [Doyle] Watson; Poe gave him Holmes” (Introduction, xv). Though an adventurous hero of the “wavering” sort as identified by Lukacs, “swept into critical and incomplete sympathy with the main protagonist,” he emerges as a hero nonetheless, engaging the confidence and sympathy of the reader (Edwards, Introduction, xvi). While Holmes remains a
spectacle and a novum, a man we would like to meet, Watson becomes here a trusted voice, a loyal friend, a dependable ally—a man we would like to be. His presence increases the masculine valence of the fledgling series tenfold.
“A SCANDAL IN BOHEMIA”: HOLMES AS CHASTE LOVER

Doyle’s final move towards the reclamation of Holmes is not achieved--nor does it become really necessary--until the publication of the first short story, “A Scandal in Bohemia” in The Strand magazine. The launch of the magazine in January, 1891 and its policy of “running complete short stories with recurring characters instead of serializing novels” gave Doyle “the idea of reviving Sherlock Holmes in more reminiscences by his companion, Doctor Watson” (Eyles 17, 19). That Doyle had no idea of the popularity his character would attain can be seen from the letter to his mother dated November 11, 1891, in which he speaks of “slaying Holmes in the sixth [story] & winding him up for good & all. He takes my mind from better things” (qtd. in Eyles 19). But the short story-length adventures would prove to be the cornerstone of Doyle’s success as an author and a financial windfall he could not ignore, despite his misgivings about the “seriousness” of the endeavor. The wider audience of The Strand, an audience comprised mainly of young men (Knight 374), thus necessitated a new phase in Holmes’ development: from a troubled and fitful degenerate into a less problematic hero figure. Holmes must ever remain a novum, an extraordinary individual whose thought and actions are worthy of being related to the public by his “Boswell,” but he must also be a relatively normal figure, a safe subject for Watson’s gaze. The sexual ambiguity does not disappear, nor can it disappear from a character so fundamentally marked as Other, but Doyle at last confronts the subject head on, centering this first short story around Holmes’ ideal woman. Following the heavy misogynistic content present in The Sign of Four, the move
seems scarcely possible. It is nevertheless necessary if Doyle is to allow Watson to idolize and idealize Holmes before an impressionable male readership.

As I have suggested, Holmes’ questionable sexual identity is a prime factor of his characterization in *A Study in Scarlet*, though never explicitly explored. Potentially unfavorable impressions are obviated by the presence of a conventional masculine adventure narrative both in *Scarlet* and *The Sign of Four*--in the latter the trappings of romance are woven in rather than merely inserted, giving the text the layered quality of a palimpsest (Kestner 59-60). Also in *Four*, the revitalized presence of Watson, as well as his courtship and marriage, further serve to bury the question. The immediacy of the short story format do not allow for these strategies to work effectively. The mystery puzzle is the *raison d’etre* of the shorter narrative, and cannot function merely as the introduction to another form of narrative such as occurs in both *Scarlet* and (to a lesser degree) *Four*.

In both of the early novels Holmes “discovers” more conventional and sanctioned adventure stories in the confessions of the captured criminals, Jefferson Hope and Jonathan Small. Though Doyle will occasionally make use of this formula again (notably, in “The Gloria Scott” (1893), “The Cardboard Box” (1893), “The Abbey Grange” (1904), and another novel, *The Valley of Fear* (1914)), it is Holmes’ sayings and doings which dominate the stories from 1891 onward, thus aligning the series more closely than ever with the troublesome Poe originals.\(^1\) Further, though the marriage of Watson had functioned as a preserver of masculinity and heterosexual norms in *The Sign of Four*, it proves to be merely an obstacle in the shorter fiction. In fine, there should be no occasion

\(^1\)The editor of *The Strand*, Herbert Greenhough Smith, later recorded his first impressions on reading “Scandal”: “I realized at once that here was the greatest short story writer since Edgar Allan Poe” (qtd. in Kestner 74). The links between Holmes and Poe’s Dupin are even more noticeable in the short story format, especially in a story whose plot structure owes much to “The Purloined Letter” (Atkinson 53).
for Watson the married professional and Holmes the bachelor amateur to come into
contact with each other, a dilemma Doyle acknowledges at the opening of “Scarlet” when
Watson remarks:

My marriage had, as [Holmes] foretold, drifted us away from each other. My own
complete happiness, and the home-centered interests which rise up around the man
who first finds himself master of his own establishment, were sufficient to absorb
all my attention . . . (5)

While the statement safely entrenches the narrator in married respectability for the
new readers of The Strand, it also concedes the social gap between the observer and the
observed, a gap that must be bridged if any further “reminiscences” are possible.

Therefore, “A Scandal in Bohemia”--the first Holmes story to reach a wide
audience and the beginning of Doyle’s popularity with English readers--marks many
other beginnings for the series as well. It is the first time that Sherlock Holmes is the true
center of the story, competing with neither the heroism of past narratives and narrators
nor his more familiar and sympathetic chronicler for the reader’s attention. It is the first
occasion requiring Doyle to negotiate the boundary of Watson’s new domestic
circumstances, a problem he will most frequently resolve either by setting the events of a
story before Watson’s marriage or by arranging for him to visit Holmes at Baker Street--
thus, it is the beginning of the torturous and confusing chronology so revered by the
Sherlockians. It is also the beginning of Holmes’ establishment role as Masculinity’s
Policeman, the committed (if eccentric) upholder of conventional values. As I argue,
none of these changes are possible without the emergence of a new, more acceptable
Holmes, one who will neither offend nor alienate the Strand’s readership by encouraging
suspicions about his sexuality. Doyle ingeniously, if incompletely, solves the problem by
reinventing Holmes as a chaste romantic figure.
“A Scandal in Bohemia” depicts the efforts of the king of a German principality (Wilhelm Von Ormstein) to retrieve an incriminating photograph from a former lover, Irene Adler, an American actress and “well-known adventuress” (12). This is not a tale of RACHE in actuality but of revenge that is threatened; significantly, it is not a man’s life at stake but a man’s reputation, as well as his successful attainment of a prudent and political marriage. Irene, who labels herself “one whom he [Von Ormstein] has cruelly wronged” (28), threatens to send the photograph of herself and Von Ormstein to the King of Scandinavia, thereby preventing the marriage of Von Ormstein to that kingdom’s princess. The “strict principles” of the Scandinavian royal family mean, according to Von Ormstein, that “A shadow of doubt as to my former conduct would bring the matter to an end” (14). Holmes’ is commissioned to retrieve the photograph and so remove the threat. Though his task is a slight matter in comparison to the murder investigations of Scarlet and Four, Holmes is unable to complete it successfully; Von Ormstein’s reputation and marriage are “saved” not by his actions but by Irene Adler’s decision to marry another man. Here, then, is another first for the series: Holmes’ failure to solve the mystery. However, his agency is reduced in exchange for an increased humanity, while his sportsmanlike bow to Irene’s abilities emphasize both his manliness and his professionalism, in marked contrast to his pettishness in A Study in Scarlet.

As it follows hard upon the heels of Holmes’ misogynist remarks in Four, the opening of “Scandal” is nearly as hard to take and shocking to the reader as that novel’s opening cocaine scene: “To Sherlock Holmes she is always the woman. I have seldom heard him mention her under any other name. In his eyes she eclipses and predominates the whole of her sex” (5). Like the drug use scene also, the passage clearly signals a
deliberate shift in Holmes’ characterization; Watson is imparting new and qualifying information to be assimilated into the complete picture of his friend’s personality. In an effort to reconcile the Holmes of *Four* with that of “Scandal,” Watson is quick to insist that “It was not that he felt any emotion akin to love for Irene Adler,” and tries to elucidate Holmes’ true nature by offering an analogy similar to Holmes’ love story/Euclid opposition: “Grit in a sensitive instrument, or a crack in one of his own high-power lenses, would not be more disturbing than a strong emotion in a nature such as his” (5). Here it is not woman per se but “strong emotion” to which Holmes objects: “as a lover he would have placed himself in a false position. He never spoke of the softer passions, save with a gibe and a sneer” (5). Irene Adler, about whom the reader as yet knows nothing, seems to comprise a tantalizing exception to these rules. It is in this context of love and “the softer passions” that Watson concedes “And yet there was but one woman to him, and that woman was the late Irene Adler . . . .” (5). With this evasive opening, Doyle shrewdly hooks his new readers by seeming to promise a love interest for his detective, or at least, the closest thing to one possible for a man who speaks of love “with a gibe and a sneer.” It is the first step towards achieving the general moral effect of “A Scandal in Bohemia”: that of aligning the sexually-ambiguous Holmes (or seeming to) with the dominant heterosexual discourse on love, marriage, and sexual responsibility.

In his analysis of the story, Michael Atkinson regards “Scandal” as a favorite story among fans and casual readers alike “because it provides a story in which Holmes’ vigilant virginity is at once sustained and relaxed” (48). In fact, the story—with its over-emphatic discussion of “the woman”—helps to promote this idea of Holmes’ supposed virginity, replacing an apparent sexual deviant with a celibate heterosexual. As with the
conception of Holmes as Masculinity’s Policeman, Atkinson’s assumption of Holmes’ “literal” or “biological” virginity (46, 47) can be arrived at only with the benefit of hindsight. The Holmes of “Scandal” is many years away from making the relatively unambiguous claim, “I have never loved” (“The Devil’s Foot,” (1910) 94), and in any case, such a claim does not guarantee his total sexual abstinence.

Far from working against an impression of manliness, Holmes’ “virginity” is posed in such a way in “Scandal” as to promote traditional ideas of nobility and romanticism by its equation with sacrifice and self-control. Though his disguised surveillance of Irene Adler does not help him retrieve the incriminating photograph, it does facilitate the marriage of Irene to Godfrey Norton by providing a witness for their impromptu wedding. As Atkinson notes, Holmes “makes her marriage to another man possible, in that very act denying her forever to himself. This is the stuff of purest romance, chivalric or domestic, medieval or modern” (48). That the detective’s virginity is confidently presumed is a testament to the success of Doyle’s long-term desexing strategy; that his virginity does not carry connotations of ineptitude and inexperience--that he in fact emerges as a more masculine and heroic figure than ever--is owing in no small part to his “sacrifice” in this story.

Further, Holmes’ attendance at this bizarre, almost farcical wedding is instrumental in establishing his apparent heterosexuality. For his services as a witness, he receives from Irene a sovereign, which, he tells Watson, “I mean to wear . . . on my watch-chain in memory of the occasion” (19). The acceptance of the revered token against the backdrop of the wedding ceremony effectively marries Holmes to Adler, symbolically if not actually. The scene is contrasted with Holmes’ refusal of Von Ormstein’s “emerald
snake ring,” offered in gratitude for his efforts (28). The moment is a paradigm shift for Holmes’ characterization, as well as the true beginning of Holmes’ role as the policeman of masculinity. Holmes accepts the golden, circular token of the woman and refuses that of the man—in effect, he acknowledges the happily married wife and rejects “Bohemia.” Holmes’ abnormal, vagabond and transgressive existence is identified as “Bohemian” at the beginning of the tale: “Holmes, who loathed every form of society with his whole Bohemian soul, remained in our lodgings at Baker Street, buried among his old books, and alternating from week to week between cocaine and ambition” (5). By the story’s end, due to his evident disapproval of Von Ormstein’s dalliances and his wholehearted admiration for Irene Adler, he has been converted from a dissolute and amoral transgressor to a moral champion and defender of the status quo, a role he was to play (uneasily) for the rest of his career. The scene is immediately followed by Watson’s fairytale-styled wrap up: “And that was how a great scandal threatened to affect the kingdom of Bohemia, and how the best plans of Mr. Sherlock Holmes were beaten by a woman’s wit” (29). A scandal has indeed threatened “the kingdom of Bohemia” (an apt description of Holmes’ Baker Street citadel): namely, that of Holmes’ aberrant sexuality.

What is Irene Adler’s peculiar transformative power that prevents this threatening scandal? To ask the question is tantamount to asking why Irene Adler is “the woman” to Holmes, and what qualities in her does he find so attractive and persuasive. The most obvious reason offered by the text is her mental sharpness. Although Holmes does locate the incriminating photograph, Irene sees through his disguise, guesses his intentions, and escapes with the prize. In short, she outwits him, thus besting him in the most crucial dimension of intellect. That he should appreciate this aspect of her personality is not
surprising; even in his most misogynistic mode, Holmes grudgingly acknowledges Mary Morstan’s “decided genius” in *The Sign of Four* (119). The other attributes that appear to attract Holmes are perhaps less obvious, but more compelling, having less to do with her intellect or “that true cold reason which I place above all things” (*Four* 119) than with her own marginal Otherness. Her status as an American—always dangerous figures in the stories, despite Doyle’s feelings of brotherhood for the United States—and her ambiguous profession of actress/adventuress serve to mark her as potentially transgressive, like Holmes himself.² Her residence in “Briony Lodge,” a thinly-veiled version of London’s St. John’s Wood, suggests that she is the mistress and “kept woman” of Godfrey Norton; taken together with her dalliance with the king and her “dubious and questionable memory” (5), the evidence points to her being a sexual “adventuress” above all, one who exists outside of conventional and sanctioned norms. While Kestner views this sexual Otherness as antithetical to Holmes since it poses a threat “to the male and to male codes” (77), this also is a judgment from hindsight. Irene’s existence on the fringe of normative sexual behavior might be powerfully attractive to so sexually Othered and ambiguous a figure as the early Holmes. Like Holmes also, Irene is a musical being; her distinguished operatic career would surely appeal to a violinist who was “not only a very capable performer but a composer of no ordinary merit” (“The Red-Headed League” 64). This is no insignificant parallel if we concede Kestner’s observation that Holmes’ interest in the violin “evokes the focus of Walter Pater on music as the most perfect of arts, linking him with doctrines of artistic purity” (63)—doctrines associated with an ambiguous decadent aestheticism.

² Watson’s remark that “the stage lost a fine actor” (21) in Holmes further aligns him with an actress/adventuress.
Above all, it is Irene’s streak of masculinity that seems to attract the hitherto effeminate detective.\(^3\) Atkinson notes that, while Irene initially seems to be the aggressor in the story, she is actually the “besieged” party (45), forced to suffer Von Ormstein’s ransackings and waylayings. Her procurement of the photograph seems to indicate her intention to blackmail the young king, yet it emerges that she retains it “only to safeguard myself, and to preserve a weapon which will always secure me from any steps which he [the king] might take in the future” (28). Granting the point that Irene’s plight as the besieged emphasizes her femininity, it must be said that the power she maintains over Von Ormstein masculinizes her character, as does the stylish ease with which she thwarts the king’s efforts. She is praised for her beauty by all the main characters, even Holmes--yet Von Ormstein also marvels at “how quick and resolute” she is (28). “She has a soul of steel,” he remarks, “. . . the face of the most beautiful of women, and the mind of the most resolute of men” (14). The tenor of Von Ormstein’s approbation does not associate Irene with a feminized instinct or intuition, but with a very masculine decisiveness and mental energy. Watson therefore seems cagey when he refers to “a woman’s wit”; Irene clearly possesses and utilizes the wits of a man (29).

Irene’s uncanny knack of obtaining, or approximating, masculine agency is never more apparent than when she follows Holmes back to Baker Street dressed as a man to wish him good night. It is a theatrical trick worthy of Holmes himself, as indeed are most of Irene Adler’s actions in the story. John A. Hodgson notes that Irene’s “defenses are in

\(^{3}\) Adaptors of Holmes for the stage and screen have noted and developed this subtle but palpable “streak.” In the “Scandal” episode of Granada Television’s The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes (1984), for example, Irene is depicted matching or besting the young king in feats of riding and marksmanship. She is also shown engineering the fateful photo session, taking advantage of a drunken and insensible Von Ormstein.
fact oddly reflective of Holmes’s own moves” and adds that Holmes’s reaction to her disguised good night wish, “‘Now who the deuce could that have been’ . . . contains its own hint of her resourceful duplicity” (53, emphasis Hodgson’s). “Male costume is nothing new to me,” she confides, in the letter to Holmes that closes the story, “I often take advantage of the freedom which it gives”—a declaration of independence that both looks forward to the New Woman and backward to the “Bohemian” liberty of a George Sand (28)4 Sherlock Holmes, an acknowledged master of disguise, fails to recognize the “slim youth in an ulster” who hurries down the busy, darkened London street (26). But the retreating, androgynous figure (it is a sexless “slim youth”) might well have been the youthful Dupin-Holmes of A Study in Scarlet, lost in his nocturnal perambulations.

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4 The device of the disguise encapsulates the transformation that takes place in Holmes over these three narratives. Although Holmes is frequently depicted as being a master of disguise in the stories, he does not employ this skill in A Study in Scarlet. He is, however, fooled by the disguise of an unnamed confederate of Jefferson Hope, who visits Baker Street costumed as a woman. Holmes unsuccessfully pursues the interloper across London, describing him in admiring terms as “a young man—and an active one, too, besides being an incomparable actor” (Scarlet 47). The cross-dressing man of Scarlet and the cross-dressing woman of “Scandal” bracket Holmes’ own disguise in The Sign of Four: that of an old sailor. Holmes thus admires this pair of actors who can transmute their gender, and himself impersonates a member of a profession marked as being sexually ambivalent.
CONCLUSION

When Doyle decided to slay his most popular creation in 1893, he little expected the turmoil that followed. In his autobiography, Memories and Adventures, he wrote of being “amazed at the concern expressed by the public. They say that a man is never properly appreciated until he is dead, and the general protest against my summary execution of Holmes taught me how many and how numerous were his friends” (99). While some of his readers expressed their grief by wearing black mourning bands (Eyles 31), some twenty thousand people exhibited their disapproval more emphatically by canceling their subscriptions to The Strand magazine (Jaffe 9). Doyle’s biographer Charles Higham perhaps overstates the case when he writes that “not until the death of Queen Victoria seven years later was there such widespread mourning” (221).

Nevertheless, despite Doyle’s conviction that the stories of the great detective represented a “lower stratum of literary achievement,” Holmes had become a “living actual personality” to his readers, many of whom were outraged at his “death” (Memories 99,108).

Reluctantly, Doyle bowed to pressure and resurrected Holmes in 1904, in a series of new stories aptly entitled, The Return of Sherlock Holmes. Holmes’ infamous nemesis Professor Moriarty indeed perished at Reichenbach Falls, we learn in “The Empty House,” but Holmes escaped. “About that chasm,” says Holmes, when Watson asks how he survived the fall, “I had no serious difficulty in getting out of it, for the very simple reason that I never was in it” (15). This fortuitous resurrection is possible only because
Holmes’ body was never recovered. Watson writes in “The Final Problem”: “Any attempt at recovering their bodies was absolutely hopeless, and there . . . will lie for all time the most dangerous criminal and the foremost champion of the law of their generation” (267-268). It is certainly possible to read in this move evidence of Doyle’s own commercial savviness and reluctance to burn his most profitable bridge. It is equally likely that no bodies can be recovered because of Doyle’s re-theorizing of Holmes as a “calculating machine” and a character who “admits of no light or shade” (Memories 108). Following the reclamation begun in “A Scandal in Bohemia” and the gradual privileging of Holmes’ mental over his physical presence, neither Holmes nor Moriarty, his “feared and desired Other” (Barsham 85), possessed bodies in the mind of their creator.

In his controversial revisionist pastiche, The Last Sherlock Holmes Story (1977), Michael Dibdin knowingly builds upon the ambiguities in Watson’s would-be elegy, presenting a nightmarish vision of Doyle’s London in which Holmes, Moriarty and Jack the Ripper are the same man. Despondent with ennui and ill health, paranoid from his overindulgence in cocaine, and above all, grief-stricken at Watson’s abandonment of him for a married life, Holmes retreats into his murderous alter-ego, “Moriarty,” and finds sadistic pleasure in mutilating the prostitutes of London’s East End. Significantly, Dibdin begins the shift from great detective to sex murderer with the degenerate Holmes of The Sign of Four, whose bitter misogyny and obsessive cocaine use are reinterpreted as unheeded cries for help.

Dibden’s novel is of interest here for its ingenious and disturbing attempts to illuminate the gray spaces in Doyle’s characterization of Sherlock Holmes; his depiction of the coexistence of the two characters within the same man reveals the long-standing
awareness among Holmesians of the detective’s conflicted, incomplete, and sexually suspect personality. Further, his reinvention of the detective as a sensual, emotionally-driven being confirms the wisdom (the commercial wisdom, at any rate) of Doyle’s erasure of Holmes’ body. To grant Sherlock Holmes a body, the novel suggests, is to make him evil. The seeming perversion of a heroic character is but a development of themes and traits present in the original stories; a Sherlock Holmes capable of committing the horrific slayings of a Jack the Ripper is certainly capable of overindulging in cocaine, stalking the lowest parts of London, or beating corpses in a dissecting room. In Dibdin’s seemingly irreverent novel-- as in numerous speculative pastiches and adaptations, parodies, homoerotic fiction, and even apologist “Sherlockian” defenses--a version exists of the unreclaimed Holmes, in all his deviant and disturbing glory.


- - -. Memories and Adventures. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1924.


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Thomas Glynn Bragg was born in Jacksonville, Florida. After nearly a decade of occupations, including aircraft technician, waiter, truckloader, and manager of numerous bookstores, he returned to college, graduating with honors from the University of North Florida in 2000. Primarily interested in Romantic and Victorian literature, he is a two-time recipient of the Kirkland Fellowship for Victorian Studies at the University of Florida. The focus of his graduate studies has been on genre fiction, especially marginal and noncanonical historical novels.