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### Playing with Gender and the Stories of Sherlock Holmes: the most important (wo)men in the life of the world's greatest consulting detective

#### ABSTRACT

*Sherlock Holmes is arguably the world's most famous fictional detective. Similarly, the characters created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle to share the pages with his consulting detective are some of the most recognized names within the crime fiction canon. This article explores the most important men in the life of Sherlock Holmes with particular focus on his loyal friend Dr John Watson and his archenemy Professor James Moriarty. These novels and short stories are regularly adapted with numerous stage, radio, film and television versions made since the mid-1890s. Some adaptations have been faithful to the original texts while others have pushed various creative boundaries. Of special interest for this article is the CBS television production Elementary (2012-present) which re-imagines the most important men in the life of Sherlock Holmes as women with the central narratives of the original works reconstructed to facilitate Dr Joan Watson and Ms. Jamie Moriarty.*

#### KEYWORDS

crime fiction  
Sir Arthur  
Conan Doyle  
*Elementary*  
gender  
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Holmes  
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#### INTRODUCTION

Sherlock Holmes is arguably the world's most famous fictional detective. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle created the consulting detective, along with the array of characters – each famous in their own right – with whom Holmes shared the pages that detailed his exploits, in the late 1880s. From the first appearance of Holmes in *A Study in Scarlet* in 1887 to the final baffling but inevitably solved mysteries in *The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes* in 1927 Sherlock Holmes captured and held the public imagination.

Throughout this period of 40 years Doyle produced four novels and 56 short stories featuring his celebrated protagonist. This corpus, though impressive, was insufficient to

satisfy the demand of those who wanted more; more of Mr. Sherlock Holmes, more of his faithful friend Dr John Watson and more of the rather diabolical Professor James Moriarty.

This demand continues unabated and has resulted in the Sherlock Holmes novels and short stories enjoying a strong history of adaptation with numerous stage, radio, film and television versions made since the mid1890s. Some adaptations have been faithful to the original texts while others have pushed various creative boundaries. Of special interest for this article is the CBS television production *Elementary* (2012-present) which has successfully re-imagined the most important men in the life of Sherlock Holmes as women with the central narratives of the original works reconstructed to facilitate Dr Joan Watson and Ms. Jamie Moriarty.

### **RE-IMAGINING THE GREAT DETECTIVE**

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle carefully crafted and then presented his creation but grew tired of the man, becoming so frustrated with Holmes that he killed him less than a decade after his debut, dispatching the Victorian hero in *The Final Problem* (first published in *The Strand Magazine* in 1893 and then as part of a collection of short stories, *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*, in 1894). As Doyle declared in a letter to his mother, the character of Sherlock Holmes and his adventures took his ‘mind from better things’ (Doyle in Lellenberg et al. 2008: 300). Indeed, though most closely associated with his Sherlock Holmes stories, the Scottish physician was a prolific author writing across a range of genres in addition to producing numerous historical texts.

The sustained pressure to revive the great Sherlock Holmes would eventually prove too difficult to resist. Public demand, the fiscal incentive that came with being offered ‘an unprecedented 100 pounds per thousand words’ (Lycett 2007: 282) and a growing irritation with his imitators including Australian writers Guy Boothby and E.W. Hornung (Lycett 2007: 283) saw the consulting detective return in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (first serialized in *The Strand Magazine* over 1901 and 1902 before being published as the third of four Sherlock Holmes novels in 1902).

However, there were numerous others who were keen to fill any perceived gaps. Indeed, the first adaptations were seen as early as the 1890s. The dialogue, the mannerisms, the silhouette all became entrenched within the crime fiction canon as well as across popular culture, from books to merchandise to television. As the image below demonstrates, Sherlock Holmes is very much a part of the everyday.



Figure 1: A *landscape workers' wheelbarrow*, Hyde Park (Sydney), June 2014.  
Photograph by author.<sup>1</sup>

Soon after the career of Sherlock Holmes was launched, there were re-imaginings of the great detective that at first supplemented and then grew to overwhelm Doyle's efforts to satisfy his readers and his publishers. Since the first adaptations there has been an almost constant influx of new material that reflects, remodels, reveres or sees a silly side to these stories of mystery and detection. The bulk of these works are recorded, in an ambitious project, in Ronald B. DeWaal's massive multi-volume bibliography titled *The Universal Sherlock Holmes* (1995), which is described as being:

[...] a comprehensive record of the appearances in books, periodicals and newspapers of the Sacred Writings or Canonical tales (fifty-six short stories and four novels), the Apocrypha and the manuscripts written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle between 1886 and 1927, together with the translations of these tales into sixty-three languages, plus Braille and shorthand, the writings about the Writings or higher criticism, writings about Sherlockians and their societies, memorials and memorabilia, games, puzzles and quizzes, phonograph records, audio and video tapes, compact discs, laser discs, ballets, films, musicals, operettas, oratorios, plays, radio and television programs, parodies and pastiches, children's books, cartoons, comics, and a multitude of other items – from advertisements to wine – that have accumulated throughout the world on the two most famous characters in literature. (DeWaal 1995: online)

Interestingly, despite the varied and vast body of work that now contributes to the Sherlock Holmes industry, some boundaries have only recently been tested. This article explores how amidst the comedies, the blatantly commercial endeavours and the attempts to be sympathetic

to the original narratives, the idea of playing with gender has been largely ignored until now.

### **PLAYING WITH GENDER: 1987**

As noted above, re-imagining Sherlock Holmes is not a recent phenomenon. However, to take some of the most important men in the life of this most famous protagonist and present them as women is a bold and unusual move. Indeed, within a genre where the idea of the male detective, though challenged, remains dominant, playing with gender is a high-risk manoeuvre for creators and producers of television series. A notable exception was seen in the mid1980s when, in 1984, the well known male amateur detective and writer of mystery novels, Ellery Queen, was re-imagined as an unknown female amateur detective and writer of crime fiction, Jessica Fletcher. The series *Murder, She Wrote* was incredibly successful and ran for twelve seasons (264 episodes), eight of which resulted in the show being listed within the top ten programs in the United States (Anon 1996: C3).

Perhaps inspired by the early and continued successes of the Jessica Fletcher franchise, CBS took the idea of making a famous male character more contemporary by re-imagining that character as female in *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* (1987). In this adaptation of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's works, Jane Watson (Margaret Colin), a private detective, travels from the United States to England to finalize the sale of the estate of her grandfather John Watson. Upon her arrival at what was once her grandfather's home, she is presented with an envelope. Following the instructions within, Watson makes her way to a primitive cryogenic capsule and revives a suspended Sherlock Holmes (Michael Pennington). It is revealed that Holmes had been placed in a state of suspension after contracting bubonic plague, with the hope that he might be revived when a cure was available. After appropriate health care is provided, Holmes and Jane Watson are on the case.

The venture did not commute to an on-going series, remaining a stand-alone made for television movie, but CBS was not deterred and would broadcast a very similar film, *1994 Baker Street: Sherlock Holmes Returns*, in 1993 with Anthony Higgins as Sherlock Holmes and Debrah Farentino as Amy Winslow. This effort would result in another stand-alone title. It would be almost twenty years before the concept of Sherlock Holmes, being ably assisted by a woman, would resonate with viewers. In 2012 CBS launched *Elementary*, with a woman as Watson, a series that has realized critical and popular success.

## PLAYING WITH GENDER (AGAIN): 2012

The CBS television series *Elementary*, which premiered in 2012, has been the vehicle for the Sherlock Holmes stories that has enjoyed the most success for this United-States-based network. Starring Johnny Lee Miller as Sherlock Holmes and Lucy Liu as Joan Watson, *Elementary*, in sharp contrast to the one-off efforts noted above, has enjoyed some ongoing success and has been renewed for a third season.

In this re-imagination of the Victorian-set, London-based mysteries, the boundaries that have confined the gender roles of the characters have been pushed further than ever before, with not one but three characters being subjected to a gender switch for this new suite of stories. These characters – Joan Watson, Jamie Moriarty and Ms. Hudson – are each discussed, briefly, below.

### *John Watson is now Joan Watson*

The first and most obvious change for viewers is that Dr John Watson is now Dr Joan Watson. Joan Watson, portrayed by Lucy Liu, is a ‘disgraced surgeon’ (Parrish 2013: 48) who has changed career and is now working as a sober companion for recovering alcohol and drug addicts. Holmes, having moved from London to New York, is a drug addict recently released from a rehabilitation facility and his father has employed Watson to assist in supervising his recovery.

Of particular interest here is that Liu was surprised by the reaction to her gender, expecting more controversy over her ethnicity:

‘I think that’s more of a hot topic,’ she says. ‘*Why are you putting an Asian person as Watson?* People are harping more on the fact that it’s a woman, which I find fascinating.’ (quoted in Parrish 2013: 48; emphasis original)

The first few episodes of the first season are not particularly engaging. Joan Watson comes across as an object of curiosity rather than a strong character with something to contribute to the storyline. It is almost as if the producers, having taken their creative concept through to the point of production, were forced to ask themselves, ‘Now what do we do?’ This question is answered reasonably quickly and despite some initial disappointments, Liu goes on to deliver some impressive performances while simultaneously challenging the expectations of John Watson, of the traditional off-sider and of women within crime fiction narratives.

John Watson, despite his medical training and a rather successful military career, is

often presented – and subsequently perceived – as slightly foolish,<sup>2</sup> usually in an effort to highlight the exceptional brilliance of Sherlock Holmes. In this iteration Watson is presented as particularly intelligent; she serves as a companion to Holmes and also, when required, as a fellow combatant, challenging decisions and investigative techniques. In this way Watson is elevated from the shadows and often stands equal to Holmes, casting off the shackles of the stereotypical off-sider or sidekick.

Perhaps most importantly, Watson has not suffered the fate of many women within the crime fiction genre - to take on an important role only to fall victim to the almost-inevitable ‘marriage plot’ (Klein 1988/1995: 40). Moreover, the marriage plot has been actively dismissed by executive producer Robert Doherty, who wants to retain for Watson and Holmes the challenges associated with developing a complex working relationship, noting that, ‘In so many respects, it’s too easy to turn this into a romance. We could do that in a heartbeat – Lucy and Johnny have incredible chemistry as Sherlock and Watson’ (quoted in Parrish 2013: 48). Though Watson does engage in a sexual relationship with Mycroft Holmes, she does so very much on her own terms.

#### *James Moriarty is now Jamie Moriarty*

Natalie Dormer portrays Irene Adler who, in a stunning move, is also revealed to be Jamie Moriarty. Thus, in a clever narrative twist the woman whom Holmes found most impressive in the original stories in terms of intelligence and resourcefulness – the one who would always be known as ‘*the woman*’ (Doyle 1981: 1; emphasis original) – is also his archenemy. The evil Professor James Moriarty, the ‘Napoleon of crime’ (Doyle 1950: 239), is now a beautiful but still treacherous consulting criminal, a near-perfect *femme fatale*.

Those working with Doyle’s stories often superimpose a romantic interest upon Holmes’ relationship with Adler. In *Elementary* this is, very successfully, transposed to the relationship Holmes has with Moriarty. As a result the dichotomy of good versus evil is complicated by feelings of admiration and desire. The sexual nature of the relationship is reflected in the way that Holmes utilizes the beehives on the roof of his New York brownstone to hide the letters that result from his ongoing secret correspondence with Moriarty (Episode 36, ‘The Diabolical Kind’). Holmes’ affection for Watson has been acknowledged previously in a similar, if more public, way when he discovered a new species of bee and named it after her: *Euglossa Watsonia* (Episode 24, ‘Heroine').

In a significant step for gender equality, Watson plays a crucial part in bringing

Moriarty to account for her crimes (Episode 24, ‘Heroine’). This plot point emphasizes the capability of women – who, despite centuries of contributing to crime fiction as characters, writers and readers, are still often marginalized across many of the different subgenres, both on the page and on the screen – effectively represents the best and the worst humankind has to offer. Notably, women can quite competently mastermind diabolical plots as well as devising and executing plans to foil those plots. In the original novels and short stories, ‘women are portrayed as more vulnerable than men to manipulation by Holmes’ (Jann 1990: 697). In this example of re-imagination, Holmes is more vulnerable to manipulation than he realizes. It will take a woman - in this case, Watson - to be impervious to the machinations of Moriarty (Episode 24, ‘Heroine’).

#### *Mrs. Hudson is now Ms. Hudson*

In another twist Mrs. Hudson, a ‘long-suffering woman’ (Doyle 1997: 114), is not what she initially appears, with Holmes commenting to Watson that ‘[a]t some point these men must realize Ms. Hudson has an Adam’s apple’ (Episode 19, ‘Snow Angels’). Hudson, portrayed by Candis Cayne, makes only a limited number of appearances - the first in ‘Snow Angels’ in which the traditional duties of landlady, often presented as housekeeper, are given a layer of gravitas. Hudson, an authority on Ancient Greek, sorts out Holmes’ library:

By subject matter, then by author. You start with the hard sciences on the north wall, and then you move clockwise around the room in descending order of academic rigour. That way, *Physics* by Aristotle is as far away from *You Can Learn Telepathy* by Morton Zuckerman as possible. (Episode 19, ‘Snow Angels’)

Of special interest to Sherlockians, it is suggested here, is the idea that disguise is the privileged domain of Sherlock Holmes. No longer. Now, disguise, in a myriad of disruptive and misleading ways, is employed by all of the characters. There is no immediate certainty for viewers. For example, is Mycroft Holmes merely a successful restaurateur? Is he, instead, a criminal mastermind, a gullible businessman or, much like his character in the original texts, an agent of the Crown? Similarly, Sherlock Holmes is not what he appears to be at first. In many respects, the character accentuates characteristics of the original creation, such as criminal behaviour and drug use. In other ways, Johnny Lee Miller’s interpretation of the consulting detective, while presenting many of the traditional complexities of the man, is much softer than the character realized by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. For example, he holds a genuine affection for those who work closely with him - for Watson, noted above, as well as

for Captain Thomas Gregson and Detective First Grade Marcus Bell, both of the New York Police Department.

### **RE-IMAGINATION AND RECEPTION**

Any attempt to gauge an author's reaction to a re-interpretation of their work, when that author is unable or unwilling to comment, is always based on speculation. It can be argued though that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's reaction to the re-imagined Watson, Moriarty and Hudson would have been one of disapproval. Many of the stories within what is referred to as the Sherlock Holmes canon are stories that, in some way, are attempting to reassert the influence and power of an empire that is becoming increasingly unstable. Moreover, Doyle himself advocated certainty - like Holmes, he wanted to know, he wanted to be sure. In *The Sign of Four* (1890), Doyle reveals this longing for a more ordered, stable world when he has Holmes quote the British historian, explorer and philosopher William Winwood Reade: 'While the individual man is an insoluble puzzle, in the aggregate he becomes a mathematical certainty' (Doyle 1982: 99). In amidst the 'insecurities of the late Victorian period', Doyle portrayed 'people [as] remain[ing] totally predictable' (Jann 1990: 705), with predictability around class and gender proving particularly important. That a woman could reach the rank of surgeon would be confronting enough; that a woman could then rival the great consulting detective would be too much.

Some modern commentators have certainly been critical of the CBS version of Doyle's stories. In a fitting end note, though, the broadcaster selected *Elementary* as the program that would immediately follow on from the televising of the annual Super Bowl in 2013. This scheduling choice was not without some criticism, with Andrew Wallenstein of *Variety* complaining that handing 'the coveted post-game timeslot to rookie Sherlock Holmes drama *Elementary* [...] is the wrong choice for an extremely valuable piece of prime-time real estate' (2013), though commentator Andrea Morabito argued that '[...] in choosing *Elementary*, CBS is sticking with the trend of spotlighting an existing series still in its ascendency' (2013). The decision was also defended by Nina Tassler of CBS, who said:

It's a character procedural. We think it's got a lot of great appeal; the relationship between Holmes and Watson is palpable. And we just felt it was a better fit for right after the Super Bowl in terms of appealing to all viewers. (quoted in Radish 2013: online)

On 3 February 2013 the San Francisco 49ers took on the Baltimore Ravens in the most

anticipated football game of the year and lost 31 – 34. That the win of a football team named after Edgar Allan Poe,<sup>3</sup> the father of the modern detective story, set the scene for yet another re-imagining of Sherlock Holmes provided a suitable, if surprising, set of crime fiction bookends.

## CONCLUSION

Will *Elementary* continue to overcome criticism and enjoy popular success? The longevity of any series in a competitive and often fickle market is difficult to predict. Certainly there is capacity to continue with *Elementary*, alongside other re-imaginings of the stories of Sherlock Holmes, as there is an almost insatiable appetite for the consulting detective, his colleagues and his cases, even if Doyle would not have approved of this and other adaptations of his work. That playing with gender will be insufficient to maintain viewer interest in *Elementary*, and thus market share for the program, is a given. If the creative team is able to sustain interesting storylines and quality production, then the chances of success are considerably improved, though not of course guaranteed.

This article has briefly unpacked some of the interesting gender issues within the CBS television series *Elementary* focusing on how some of the most important men in the life of Sherlock Holmes have become the most important women. It is hoped that *Elementary* continues for many more seasons, as this rich re-imagining of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's stories provides numerous opportunities for popular culture researchers working in a variety of fields. The series also provides gateways for new and increasingly imaginative ways to interpret this material. As Lucy Liu commented, ethnicity is as much an issue as gender. Perhaps *Elementary* will do more than provide equalizers within the crime fiction genre for women; it may pave the way for more racially diverse adaptations. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and his contemporaries may have been shocked or merely scowled with scorn. In contrast, we have the opportunity – and the privilege – of waiting to see what comes next.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> After taking this photograph the author was advised by the landscape workers who owned this wheelbarrow that 'John [Watson]'s back in the shed.'

<sup>2</sup> Martin Freeman's portrayal of John Watson in BBC's *Sherlock* (2010-present) is an especially notable exception.

<sup>3</sup> Edgar Allan Poe died in mysterious circumstances in Baltimore in 1849. The city named their football team, The Baltimore Ravens, after Poe's poem *The Raven* (1845) in time for the team's inaugural season in 1996 (Baltimore Ravens: History).

<sup>4</sup> 'The Final Problem' was first published as a short story in 1893, before appearing in *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (1894).

<sup>5</sup> 'A Scandal in Bohemia' was first published as a short story in 1891, before appearing in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892).

<sup>6</sup> 'The Adventure of the Dying Detective' was first published as a short story in 1913, before appearing in *His Last Bow* (1917).