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# “The Woman” and the Women of Sherlock Holmes



Cassandra Poole

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*Women appear in nearly every Sherlock Holmes novel and short story. The vast majority are victims. Against the recurring oppression of women and women's sexuality in the Holmes canon, a few exceptional female characters escape their Victorian gender roles. One rises above all others. She is “the woman,” Irene Adler, whose strength, intelligence, and independence have made her a recurring star in extra-canonical books, television shows, film adaptations, and Sherlockian fan fiction. This essay focuses on women and women's sexuality within and beyond the Holmes canon to explore our enduring fascination with “the only woman to ever best Sherlock Holmes.”*

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“**T**o Sherlock Holmes she is always *the* woman. I have seldom heard him mention her by any other name. In his eyes, she eclipses and predominates the whole of her sex.” It is impossible for anyone acquainted with the Sherlock Holmes universe not to know to whom this description refers. She is Irene Adler, the only woman to ever beat Sherlock Holmes. But Irene is not the only woman in the canon. Women appear in nearly every Sherlock Holmes novel and short story. Some are Holmes’ clients, and others are wives, brides-to-be, or maids, but the vast majority are victims. Much of the oppression of women and women’s sexuality in the Sherlock Holmes stories has to do with the way sexuality was treated during the era in which Arthur Conan Doyle was writing. Still, a few women in the canon do stand to overthrow Victorian stereotypes, none so much as Irene Adler. As a result, Irene has become a staple of the Sherlockian universe, appearing in innumerable essays, pastiches, and parodies, as well as stage, television and film adaptations. To understand Irene Adler’s enduring popularity, it is necessary to look at Victorian attitudes toward women and sexuality, and at some of the women in the canon who conform to those attitudes, as well as two besides Irene who do not.

Arthur Conan Doyle introduced Sherlock Holmes to the world in 1887. Modern portrayals of the Victorian era paint a picture of prudish, straight-laced people who feared the very idea of sex. In actuality, sex and sexuality were as present then as they are now. As Christopher Redmond notes in *In Bed with Sherlock Holmes*, “The letters and diaries of many proper Victorians,” including “Queen Victoria herself,” make it clear that these people certainly felt the same passions we do today.<sup>1</sup> But Victorians took a very different approach to sexuality. For them, a person’s sexuality was to be expressed “chiefly in private, loving marriages, or else in certain other socially tolerated contexts, as gentlemen did with London’s thousands of prostitutes,” observes Redmond.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the middle years of the Victorian era, when Holmes and Doyle were growing up, were a time when “prostitution was widespread and flagrant; when many London streets were like Oriental bazaars of flesh; when the luxurious West End night houses dispensed love and liquor until dawn.”<sup>3</sup> Sexuality was just as present, but had to be pursued in a society that “maintained a strong segregation of the sexes.”<sup>4</sup>

Men and women had their own social spheres that were rarely breached by members of the opposite sex. This separation was

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due partly to the limited knowledge about what actually differentiated the sexes. Until the early 1900s, very little was known about the exact nature of sexuality, sexual characteristics, and hormones. Theorists therefore treated the genders almost as two separate species, each with their own inherent, unique attributes.<sup>5</sup> As Elizabeth Lee notes in “Victorian Theories of Sex and Sexuality,” men were seen as the “active agents, who expended energy while women were sedentary, storing and conserving energy.”<sup>6</sup> In the sexual process, men were involved only in the fertilization stage, while women had to be concerned with “pregnancy, menstruation (considered a time of illness, debilitation, and temporary insanity) and child-rearing.”<sup>7</sup> Women therefore had no energy to expend in other areas of life like men did. These reproductive differences led to Victorian beliefs in mental and emotional differences between the genders. Women were thought to be less intelligent and more emotional than men. They were thought to belong in the home, tending house and raising children, while the men were free to function in outside society. Women were seen as the weaker, gentler sex; they were innocent creatures with little sexual appetite, while men were seen as sinful and lustful.<sup>8</sup>

Toward the end of the Victorian period when Doyle began writing his Holmes stories, attitudes towards men and women’s sexuality had started to change. Women were increasingly viewed as the sinful creatures, while men could not really be blamed. Increasingly, women were portrayed as “either frigid or else insatiable. A young lady was only worth as much as her chastity and appearance of complete innocence, for women were time bombs just waiting to be set off.”<sup>9</sup> This perception that women are both innocent, naïve creatures and secretly lustful time bombs plays itself out in many of the Holmes stories. Women are frequently victims of controlling fathers or deceptive lovers, usually motivated by monetary gains, or of blackmail, usually by way of an “imprudent letter” written to a lover.<sup>10</sup> In fact, twenty of the sixty stories revolve around a love affair, and fifteen of the sixty contain explicit or implied adultery.<sup>11</sup>

Women’s roles in society changed even more during the forty-year period that Doyle published the Holmes stories, and “[A new type of women] to whom competent work had given self-confidence and strength’ could no longer be ignored.”<sup>12</sup> American author Henry James popularized the

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Lee, “Victorian Theories of Sex and Sexuality,” *The Victorian Web*, 1996, <http://www.victorianweb.org/gender/sextheory.html>.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Arthur Conan Doyle, “Charles Augustus Milverton” in *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Novels and Stories* (New York: Bantam Classic, 1986), 1:906. Unless otherwise noted, all references to Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories are to this edition.

<sup>11</sup> Redmond, *In Bed with Sherlock Holmes*, 16.

<sup>12</sup> Paul-Christoph Trüper, “Sherlock Holmes—Rooted in Reality: Gender Roles,” *Sherlock Holmes: Background to a Phenomenon*, last modified 2006,

<sup>1</sup> Christopher Redmond, *In Bed with Sherlock Holmes: Sexual Elements in Arthur Conan Doyle’s Stories* (Toronto, Simon & Pierre, 1984), 11.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Cyril Pearl, *The Girl with the Swansdown Seat* (Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1955), 5, quoted in Christopher Redmond, *In Bed with Sherlock Holmes: Sexual Elements in Arthur Conan Doyle’s Stories* (Toronto, Simon & Pierre, 1984), 12.

<sup>4</sup> Redmond, *In Bed with Sherlock Holmes*, 12.

term “New Woman” to describe the increase in independent, career-minded women toward the end of the nineteenth century. The tensions and anxieties this shift in societal norms caused among the people of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is readily apparent in the Holmes canon. As Rosemary Jan points out in “Sherlock Holmes Codes the Social Body,” many of Doyle’s stories have more to do with “challenges to the social and sexual conventions that insured order in his world” than they do with challenges to official law and order.<sup>13</sup> By upholding Victorian gender conventions in his stories, Doyle gives his readers “an antidote for the threatening sexuality of the New Woman”; in its place, he offers “the reassuring spectacle of woman’s predicable unpredictability controlled by chivalric conventions, either composed from without for their own good or internalized by the women themselves.”<sup>14</sup>

### Deducing the Plot

In one of the first short stories to display the characteristic oppression of women and women’s sexuality, “A Case of Identity,” published in 1891, Miss Mary Sutherland comes to Sherlock Holmes for help in finding her lost fiancé, Hosmer Angel. Mary is a typist with a small inheritance that she hands over every quarter to her mother and stepfather. Her stepfather has refused Mary suitors before, often saying that “a woman should be happy in her own family circle.”<sup>15</sup> Mary met Hosmer Angel at a gasfitter’s ball, became engaged to him almost immediately, and saw him in secret when her stepfather was out of town on business. On the day they were to be married, Hosmer Angel disappeared.

After investigating, Holmes realizes that Hosmer Angel was in fact Mary’s stepfather, James Windibank. Windibank forbade Mary from seeing suitors to prevent her from marrying and taking her inheritance with her. When he recognized that his stepdaughter would not remain obedient forever, he began dressing up as Hosmer Angel to keep other lovers away. He became engaged to Mary, secured her heart to the fiction of Hosmer Angel, and then ran out on their supposed wedding day, confident that she would wait for her beloved to return.

Mary Sutherland’s story perfectly exemplifies the oppression of women as well as the struggle for equality which would culminate in the era of Henry James’ “New Woman.” It is clear from the story that women in the time of the Holmes canon were generally not allowed to make their own choices; it was the place of a man—her husband or her father—to do it for her. This is evident in Mary’s stepfather’s willingness to go to such lengths to prevent her marriage. If she marries, Mary’s husband will control her assets.<sup>16</sup> Were Mary able to continue giving

her money to her family after her marriage, there would be no need for such a sham. But because her husband will control her inheritance, it is necessary for her stepfather to prevent her marriage.

Mary is a typically obedient Victorian girl: she does not question the inferiority of her position in society, and she obeys her stepfather without question for most of her life. In an interesting irony, her one disobedient, purely independent action—going to the ball—only serves to further chain her down. Through her mother and stepfather’s wicked plot, Mary is forced back into the role of compliant daughter, prevented from evolving into the independent woman she could have become, free of her family’s machinations.

A similar situation occurs in “The Adventure of the Speckled Band,” published in 1892. Helen Stoner comes to Holmes against the wishes of her terribly unpleasant stepfather, Grimesby Roylott, with concerns about death of her sister Julia, who was engaged to be married before her untimely demise. Now, two years later, Helen is also engaged to be married and has begun hearing the same noises that Julia heard before her death. Holmes eventually surmises that Roylott murdered Julia Stoner to prevent her marriage, upon which he would lose control of Julia’s late mother’s inheritance. Now that Helen is set to be married, he is attempting to murder her in the same way he killed Julia, using a poisonous speckled snake.

Again, similar circumstances repeat themselves in Doyle’s 1892 “The Adventure of the Copper Beeches,” in which Alice Rucastle is held prisoner by her father, Jephro Rucastle, to prevent her from marrying a man she met at a party. According to a maid in the story, “Miss Alice had rights of her own by will, but she was so quiet and patient that she never said a word about them, but just left everything in Mr. Rucastle’s hands.”<sup>17</sup> Alice’s husband would not be so patient, and so Mr. Rucastle tried to get his daughter to sign over those rights and imprisoned her when she would not.

### The Case of the Vanishing Sexuality

The repression of women and women’s sexuality in the Holmes canon does not always work through this same formulaic plot. Published in 1904, and set in 1899, “The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton” is an often-cited example of the oppression of female sexuality in the canon, played out through the narratives of three women. Charles Augustus Milverton, described by Holmes as “the worst man in London,” is a blackmailer extraordinaire who possesses countless letters which “compromise people of wealth and position,” including Holmes’ client, Lady Eva Blackwell.<sup>18</sup> Today, such letters might cause a small scandal or a bit of

“A woman should be happy within her own family circle.”

<http://www.text-traeger.info/SHolmes/32Gend.html>

<sup>13</sup> Rosemary Jan, “Sherlock Holmes Codes the Social Body,” *ELH* 57, no. 3, 1990: 705, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2873238>.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Doyle, “A Case of Identity,” 1:293.

<sup>16</sup> Trüper, “Sherlock Holmes—Rooted in Reality.”

<sup>17</sup> Doyle, “The Copper Beeches,” 1:516.

<sup>18</sup> Doyle, “Charles Augustus Milverton,” 1:907.

embarrassment, but in conservative Victorian times, they could bring about Armageddon if made public.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, one of Milverton's other victims has been utterly ruined by the exposure of her letters; her husband "broke his gallant heart and died."<sup>20</sup> Milverton's leverage over these women stems from the very moral nature of Victorian times, when sexuality was to be enjoyed in private, but never discussed or written about publicly. The letters these women wrote to their lovers would ruin their reputations, and nothing was as important to a proper Victorian woman as her good reputation. At the end of the story, after Milverton has been murdered by the ruined woman, Holmes and Watson burn all of the letters Milverton possessed, thereby erasing all traces of the women's sexuality.

The third woman in the story is a maid to whom Holmes becomes engaged under a false identity to acquire information. When Watson questions the morality of this duplicity, Holmes remarks, "You can't help it, my dear Watson. You must play your cards as best you can when such a stake is on the table."<sup>21</sup> Catherine Belsey remarks on how "the sexuality of these three shadowy women motivates the narrative and yet is barely present in it."<sup>22</sup> Lady Eva never appears in person; the aggrieved widow is never named; the housemaid, whose situation with Holmes parallels that of Miss Mary Sutherland and her fake fiancé in "A Case of Identity," is mentioned only once and then never appears again. As Belsey observes, "the presentation of so many women in the Sherlock Holmes stories as shadowy, mysterious and magical figures" is particularly interesting because it "precisely contradicts" the intended realism of the stories and Holmes' often-repeated pleas for scientific explicitness.<sup>23</sup>

### The Adventure of the Two Exceptional Women

Not all women in the Sherlock Holmes canon conform to the Victorian stereotype. In "The Adventure of the Copper Beeches," there is Violet Hunter, who comes to consult with Holmes about whether she should take a job she has been offered as a governess. When she first enters the room, Watson describes her as "plain but neatly dressed, with a bright, quick face, and the brisk manner of a woman who has had her own way to make in the world," and remarks that Holmes is clearly impressed with her manner and speech.<sup>24</sup> Violet states that she has no family or friends, and that she is quickly running out of money since the last family she worked for has moved away; as Watson observes, she is a woman who has had to take care of herself. While Violet describes the meeting between herself and her potential future employer, Jephro Rucastle, it

becomes apparent that she is an intelligent young woman; she even states at a later meeting with Holmes and Watson, "I am naturally observant, as you may have remarked, Mr. Holmes" (1:509). And it is true, for Violet is quick to recognize that her job as a governess for the Rucastles is not what it appears, and that something more sinister is going on.

When Holmes figures out the real state of affairs—that Rucastle has imprisoned his daughter Alice, and that Violet was meant to impersonate her to drive away Alice's fiancée—he devises a plan to free Alice in which Violet plays a central role. "I should not ask it of you if I did not think you a quite exceptional woman," he says when he asks her to trick the maid and lock her in the cellar (1:513). When she succeeds at the task, he commends her intelligence and competence, remarking, "You have done well indeed!" (1:514). Coming from Holmes, a man who often judges others and finds them wanting, Violet Hunter seems to have the Holmes seal of approval. Miss Hunter goes on to become "the head of a private school at Walsall, where she has met with considerable success" (1:518).

"I should not ask it of you  
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quite exceptional woman."

A second woman who stands out in the canon is Kitty Winter, from "The Adventure of the Illustrious Client," published in 1924. This story is unique in that it does not contain a mystery for Holmes to solve, and it is also much more implicitly sexual than other Holmes stories. Holmes' client has hired him to convince Miss Violet de Merville to break off her engagement to Baron Adelbert Gruner, who has already been accused of killing his first wife. Violet de Merville is described by the client as "young, rich, beautiful, accomplished, a wonder-woman in every way,"<sup>25</sup> but it becomes clear that she is actually a hopelessly naïve, weak, and suggestible woman. When Holmes' attempt to convince Gruner to let go of the marriage ends in a less than subtle threat against Holmes' life, he turns to his contacts in the underworld to unearth evidence of Gruner's real nature. One of those contacts finds Kitty Winter.

Watson's description of Kitty is quite unlike any other woman in the canon:

It seems [Holmes' contact] had dived down into what was peculiarly his kingdom and beside him on the settee was a brand which he had brought up in the shape of a slim, flame-like young woman with a pale, intense face, youthful, and yet so worn with sin and sorrow that one read the terrible years which had left their leprous mark upon her. (2:521)

When Kitty speaks of Gruner, Watson remarks that "there was an intensity of hatred in her white, set face and her blazing eyes such as woman seldom and man can never attain" (2:522).

<sup>25</sup> Doyle, "The Illustrious Client," 2:516.

<sup>19</sup> Trüper, "Sherlock Holmes—Rooted in Reality."

<sup>20</sup> Doyle, "Charles Augustus Milverton," 1:920.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:913.

<sup>22</sup> Catherine Belsey, "Deconstructing the Text: Sherlock Holmes," in *Sherlock Holmes: Major Stories with Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. John A. Hodson (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1984), 383.

<sup>23</sup> Belsey, "Deconstructing the Text," 383.

<sup>24</sup> Doyle, "The Copper Beeches," 1:494.

Kitty Winter is Baron Gruner's former mistress; although she does not go into detail about her past ("That's neither here nor there, Mr. Holmes" [2:522]), she says that he used her and that she would like nothing more than to "pull him into the pit where he has pushed so many!" (2:522). She tells Holmes about a little book in which Gruner documents his collection of women that he has ruined in the past, as he ruined Kitty and as he would ruin Violet in the future.

Holmes takes Kitty with him when he goes to confront Violet, and the two women are like flame and ice, Kitty passionate in her hatred of Gruner and Violet chilly in her naïve love and devotion. She tells Violet who she is, that she is just "one of a hundred that he has tempted and used and ruined and thrown into the refuse heap" (2:526). When they fail to convince Violet to break her engagement, Holmes concocts a plan to steal Gruner's book and use it to change Violet's mind. While Watson distracts the Baron, Holmes and Kitty break into his study and steal the book. But when they are almost caught, Kitty seizes the moment to have her revenge and flings acid in Gruner's face, ruining him as he had ruined her and so many others. She later gets the lightest sentence possible for her actions, in light of the terrible nature of her victim.

Although it is never stated explicitly, it is clear that Kitty Winter is a prostitute. What makes her past with Gruner all the more sinister is that she could not have been a prostitute before she met him. Kitty would had to have been a woman of some standing for Gruner to take her as a mistress.<sup>26</sup> If her ruination had simply been about him leaving her for another woman, it is unlikely she would have had to become a prostitute. She could simply have returned to whatever standing she had before, or taken her experience as Gruner's mistress to become someone else's. Critics have speculated that Kitty Winter and the other women in Gruner's little book were sold into white slavery as prostitutes.<sup>27</sup> White slavery was common throughout Europe during much of the nineteenth century, and would still have been in people's memories in 1924.<sup>28</sup> This explanation is not stated in the text and was never confirmed by Doyle, but it certainly explains Miss Winter's hatred of Gruner, as well as her face "worn with sin and sorrow."<sup>29</sup> If accurate, this past only makes Miss Winter's character more unusual in the canon, for it shows what a strong and resilient woman she must be to have not only survived such an ordeal, but to have succeeded at getting revenge upon her foe. In the end, Miss Winter can be seen as something of the hero of the story, for it is through her actions that the villain is repaid for his crimes and prevented from ever committing them again.

## Meet the Woman

Violet Hunter and Kitty Winter are strong, competent, and intelligent women, but neither is as remarkable or memorable as the third exceptional woman in the Sherlock Holmes canon: the unforgettable adventuress Irene Adler. Irene appears in the first Sherlock Holmes short story, "A Scandal in Bohemia," published in 1891. Watson begins the narrative by saying,

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.... [T]here was but one woman to him, and that woman was the late Irene Adler, of dubious and questionable memory.<sup>30</sup>

Even before Doyle tells anything of the actual story, he makes sure readers know that Irene Adler is the woman, the one woman who has earned Holmes' utmost respect. Instantly, Doyle's readers begin to wonder about what makes this mysterious woman so very important.

Irene Adler is a New Jersey-born actress and opera singer, the former prima donna of the Imperial Opera in Warsaw. In her youth, she had a love affair with the Crown Prince of Bohemia, now the King. She

possesses a photo of him and herself which could ruin his impending marriage with a Scandinavian princess. The King is certain that Irene will go through with her threat to send the photo to the royal family: "I know that she will do it.... [S]he has a soul of steel. She has the face of the most beautiful of women, and the mind of the most resolute of men," he says (2:248). He has come to Holmes to get the photo back, because though he has had Irene's house robbed, ransacked her luggage, and even personally accosted her twice in attempts to recover it, Irene is too clever to be so easily overcome.

Holmes disguises himself and goes to Irene's home, hoping to learn more about her. He discovers that "she is the daintiest thing under a bonnet on this planet," according to the men on her street (1:250). That evening, Holmes manages to gain entrance. Watson, per Holmes' plan, shouts fire in the street and tosses a smoke rocket into the house, tricking Irene into revealing the location of the photo. According to Holmes, "when a woman thinks her house is on fire, her instinct is at once to rush to the thing which she values most" (1:258). For Irene, this is the photograph. It seems as though Holmes has won. Holmes and Watson leave and return to Baker Street. As they are entering, a "slim youth" hurries past them down the street, saying, "Good-night, Mister Sherlock Holmes" (1:259).

When Holmes and Watson return to Irene's home the next day to retrieve the photograph, they find that Irene has outwitted them. She saw through Holmes' disguise, disguised herself as

"She has the face of the most beautiful of women, and the mind of the most resolute of men."

<sup>26</sup> Redmond, *In Bed with Sherlock Holmes*, 17.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>29</sup> Doyle, "The Illustrious Client," 2:521.

<sup>30</sup> Doyle, "A Scandal in Bohemia," 1:239.

a man,<sup>31</sup> and followed him back to Baker Street, impulsively telling him goodnight before fleeing with her new husband and the photograph. All she leaves behind is a cheeky letter for Holmes, a new photograph of herself for the King—which Holmes requests as payment for services rendered, futile as they ultimately were—and an assurance that she will not use the photograph against the King, but keeps it as insurance.<sup>32</sup>

The great Sherlockian myth of Irene Adler is that she is the only woman to ever beat Sherlock Holmes. She outwitted him, foiled his attempts to recover the photograph, and escaped with her new husband, leaving naught but a picture of herself behind for Holmes to brood over. She is an intelligent, capable, spirited woman, a grand adventuress. What's more, she is an honorable woman, as even the King himself is forced to admit: "I know that her word is inviolate. The photograph is now as safe as if it were in the fire."<sup>33</sup> Irene Adler is truly unique in the canon. Although she precedes them both, one can note aspects of both Violet Hunter and Kitty Winter in Irene's character. She is almost a mash-up of the two women, smart and confident like Violet, strong and fierce like Kitty. But unlike either woman, Irene Adler has one very unique trait: her overwhelming presence in the extended Holmes universe. Irene has captured the imaginations of Sherlockians since the day she first graced the canon in 1891. In addition to her appearances over the years in numerous pastiches and parodies, she has featured prominently in stage, television, and film adaptations, and even stars in her own book series.

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### The Extra-Canonical Irene

The Sherlockian myth of Irene Adler is rarely upheld in the extra-canonical universe. Recent television and film adaptations of Irene in particular are guilty of the crime of not living up to her grand myth; one might even go so far as to say they intentionally demean her character, a fact which frustrates the many Sherlockians who love and admire her. One internet critic notes, "It is repeatedly disappointing that I have yet to see a film or television adaptation of Irene Adler that exhibits her full agency, her intelligence, her refusal to play by strict gender roles, and of course, her fierce independence."<sup>34</sup>

Irene's most recent appearance on the big screen is in Guy Ritchie's 2009 and 2011 *Sherlock Holmes* films, where she is

31 In her letter Irene says, "I have been trained as an actress myself. Male costume is nothing new to me. I often take advantage of the freedom which it gives." Ibid., 1:261.

32 "As to the photograph, your client may rest in peace. I love and am loved by a better man than he. The King may do what he will without hindrance from one whom he has cruelly wronged. I keep it only to safeguard myself, and to preserve a weapon which will always secure me from any steps which he might take in the future." Ibid.

33 Ibid., 1:262.

34 Stephanie Cole, "Sherlock Goes Sexist: Arthur Conan Doyle Is Very Disappointed," *Spark Movement*, last modified February 9, 2012, <http://www.sparksummit.com/2012/02/09/sherlock-goes-sexist-arthur-conan-doyle-is-very-disappointed/>.

played by actress Rachel McAdams. Early in the first film, Irene arrives in Holmes' rooms at Baker Street while he is sleeping; upon realizing she is there, Holmes' initial thought is to check his wall safe for tampering, and to check his tea for poison. He clearly doesn't trust her.<sup>35</sup> They are portrayed as having a history. Watson refers to her having beaten Holmes in the past, perhaps recalling the events of "A Scandal in Bohemia," after which Holmes kept track of her movements. He has a file with her name on it, the contents of which Irene reads aloud while Holmes checks the safe: "Theft of Velazquez portrait from King of Spain...missing naval documents lead to resignation of Bulgarian prime minister...scandalous affair ends engagement of Hapsburg prince to Romanov princess."<sup>36</sup>

Although there is little evidence of Irene being a criminal in the canon beyond her attempted blackmail of the King of Bohemia, she is often portrayed as such in extra-canonical material. The first film has her working with Holmes' arch-enemy, Professor James Moriarty, attempting to use Holmes'

feelings for her (which canonically, are little more than fervent respect and wariness, and explicitly stated not to be love<sup>37</sup>) to get Holmes to unknowingly do Moriarty's bidding. Though she does manage to momentarily outwit Holmes and acquire the item she was attempting to steal for Moriarty, she is

tricked by the Professor in the end and used as a scapegoat while he escapes with the device he actually wanted. In the sequel film, Moriarty kills Irene because her feelings for Holmes have compromised her, and she is no longer useful to him.<sup>38</sup>

In some ways, Irene's portrayal here lives up to the Sherlockian myth. She is intelligent, resourceful, and clever: she manages to follow Holmes without being seen; she disables the cyanide machine; she tricks Holmes into ingesting poisoned wine. She is an adventuress: she has traveled around the world and mentions having been in Syria. She is said to have beat Sherlock Holmes at some point in the past. However, she does have her shortcomings. She is not an independent woman; instead, she works for Moriarty. She has fallen in love with Sherlock Holmes—where in the canon, she certainly does not—and those feelings eventually get her killed. She falls victim to the "damsel in distress" stereotype when she is nearly killed in a slaughter house and has to be rescued by Holmes and Watson. She is just not quite the Irene Adler of Sherlockian myth.

35 She even asks him, "Why are you always so suspicious?" to which he replies, "Shall I answer alphabetically or chronologically?" *Sherlock Holmes*, directed by Guy Ritchie (Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Pictures, 2009) DVD.

36 Ibid.

37 "It was not that he felt any emotion akin to love for Irene Adler. All emotions, and that one particularly, were abhorrent to his cold, precise but admirably balanced mind. He was, I take it, the most perfect reasoning and observing machine that the world has seen, but as a lover he would have placed himself in a false position." Doyle, "A Scandal in Bohemia," 1:239.

38 "It's been apparent to me for some time that you had succumbed to your feelings for him....I no longer require your services." *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows*, directed by Guy Ritchie Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers Pictures, 2011) DVD.

There are still-worse portrayals of Irene, perhaps most notably the BBC *Sherlock* episode titled “A Scandal in Belgravia.”<sup>39</sup> In this modern-day recreation of Sherlock Holmes, Irene Adler is no longer a foreign adventuress, but instead a London dominatrix who possesses incriminating photos of the royal family. Sherlock is tasked with getting the photos back. Upon his first meeting with Miss Adler, she greets him completely naked, in what she calls her “battle suit.” On one hand, this tactic prevents Holmes from reading any information about her from her clothing, so it is almost clever. On the other hand, it is overly sexualized and rather distasteful. Taking an intelligent, cunning woman—arguably the most important female character in the Sherlock Holmes canon—and turning her into a dominatrix, someone who uses her body instead of her mind to get her way, is bad enough without the nudity. However, the dominatrix angle could nearly be forgiven if it was just another tool a smart woman uses to get the information she wanted. But Irene is not portrayed as intelligent here; she is not even smart enough to know what to do with the information she has gathered until Moriarty hires her to use it to blackmail Holmes and his brother Mycroft.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps that too could be forgiven if she had actually succeeded. But she does not. The only woman to ever beat Sherlock Holmes does not actually manage to beat him in this adaptation.

She comes so very close. She has all her blackmail information stored on her cell phone, which is locked with a passcode Sherlock could not break even with several months to try. She has a list of demands for Mycroft to fulfill in exchange for her not using the information to destroy Britain. She is literally seconds away from victory when Sherlock reveals that he actually knows the passcode. He punches in the code and turns her phone to face the audience. It says “I am SHER-locked.” By making her password a silly pun on Sherlock’s name, which she did because she has fallen in love with him, she ensures her own defeat. Any other password in the world and she would have won. But her feelings got the better of her intelligence, and so the woman who beat Sherlock Holmes in 1891 fails to beat Sherlock Holmes in 2012. To really solidify that this is not the Irene Adler that Sherlockians know and love, the episode ends with Sherlock rescuing Irene from execution by a terrorist cell, like a white knight saving the damsel in distress from a fire-breathing dragon.

Even Sherlockians who bemoan the desecration of Irene Adler in film and television adaptations are guilty of excesses in authoring fan works which bend her character. There is an overwhelming tendency to “ship” Irene with Sherlock, i.e. to write fan works in which Irene and Sherlock are involved in a romantic relationship, which presents an interesting question.

<sup>39</sup> “A Scandal in Belgravia,” *Sherlock*, season 2, episode 1, directed by Paul McGuigan and written by Steven Moffat, aired January 1, 2012 (London: BBC).

<sup>40</sup> Even Holmes points out that she’s truly not that clever: “You cater to the whims of the pathetic and take your clothes off to make an impression. Stop boring me and think,” he says to her. Ibid.

Why do fans who admire Irene for her independence also desire to see her in a romantic relationship with Sherlock Holmes? This discrepancy perhaps has to do with the nature of fans. As Henry Jenkins writes,

Unimpressed by institutional authority and expertise, fans assert their own right to form interpretations, to offer evaluations, and to construct cultural canons. Undaunted by traditional conceptions of literary and intellectual property, fans raid mass culture, claiming its materials for their own use, reworking them as the basis for their own cultural creations and social interactions.<sup>41</sup>

Television fans are notorious for writing fanfiction to correct the story whenever a show does something they do not like, but literary fans do it too. When Sherlockians read “A Scandal in Bohemia,” they see a powerful, beautiful woman; they hear Watson saying that she is *the* woman to Sherlock, the only woman; they see her beating Holmes at his own game, and think, “We have to see more of her!”

Love is a natural human need; everyone wants to be loved, so it only makes sense that fans look for it in what they read and watch. That is why every hero has to have a love interest; even Sherlock Holmes. And Irene is the best character in the canon for that role. She is the only woman to catch the interest of the ever-alooof Holmes. She fascinates him; she proves to him that women can be intelligent, can be more than a match for him.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps the fact that the very fans who admire Irene for her independence and strength also desire to see her in a romantic relationship with Sherlock Holmes is not a conundrum at all. Perhaps it is a testament to the remarkable nature of her character, an ode to her status as the only woman to prove herself Holmes’ equal, and therefore, the only woman worthy of his romantic attentions.

### Solving the Case

Irene Adler appears in just one Holmes story, never says more than three lines, and is seen only through the eyes of the male characters. Almost nothing is known about her past outside the small snippet of information offered in Holmes’ index at the beginning of “A Scandal in Bohemia”:

Born in New Jersey in the year 1858. Contralto–hum!  
La Scala, hum! Prima donna Imperial Opera of Warsaw–yes!  
Retired from operatic stage–ha! Living in London–quite so!<sup>43</sup>

So why have Sherlockians taken this character and expounded on her so much? Can Sherlock Holmes calling her *the* woman

<sup>41</sup> Henry Jenkins, “Get a Life! Fans, Poachers, Nomads,” in *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 18.

<sup>42</sup> After all is said and done, and Irene is long gone, Watson notes, “He [Holmes] used to make merry over the cleverness of women, but I have not heard him do it of late.” Doyle, “A Scandal in Bohemia,” 1:262.

<sup>43</sup> Doyle, “A Scandal in Bohemia,” 1:246.

really be enough? The answer, quite simply, is yes. For many Sherlockians, Irene has become more than the woman who appears in “A Scandal in Bohemia,” and become an archetype, the absolute incarnation of powerful, independent femininity. As one female Sherlockian writes,

I knew I would like Irene upon reading the opening. For the first time, I had a central female character that was not a romantic interest nor was perceived as such. For the central male character, she was an equal, a testament to his own shortcomings and fallibility. Sherlock does not love or feel any sexual attraction to Irene, but respects and admires her.<sup>44</sup>

The general love for Irene Adler’s character stems, I think, from an admiration of her strength, beauty, and independence. She is quite unlike Mary Sutherland, Julia and Helen Stoner, Alice Rucastle, Lady Eva Blackwell, Violet de Merville, or the many other women of the Sherlock Holmes canon. Irene is strong, competent, and intelligent; she does not allow herself to be oppressed, and she does not allow herself to be bested.

In a literary universe full of victimized women, oppressed and manipulated by the men in their lives, Irene herself is the manipulator. She outwits one of the greatest detectives in literary history. She ignores all the gender roles and expectations of her time, turning conventionality on its head. She is one of the few women in the canon who overcomes Victorian boundaries, expectations, and stereotypes, who resembles a modern woman, with a sense of freedom real-life women would not achieve for decades after Irene’s invention. However she may be portrayed in the extended Sherlockian universe, the Irene Adler of the Holmes canon remains a woman to be admired, an archetype of feminine power and independence, and a symbol of what women can be, in literature and in reality. When viewed through the lens of competence and intelligence, she is an equal in every way to her male counterpart.

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The *JMURJ* Editorial Board wishes to thank Vivien Wu for permission to reproduce her artwork titled *Irene Adler* on page 18.

Ms. Wu used watercolor, pen, and graphite on paper in her 2009 work.

For information and more of Ms. Wu’s art, visit [www.vivienwu.com](http://www.vivienwu.com) and <http://viv-draws.blogspot>

<sup>44</sup> Cole, “Sherlock Goes Sexist.”