

Marriage & Scandal:

Sherlock Holmes's Treatment of Women in the Doyle Canon

by

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In both present-day media and criticism, the character of Irene Adler looms over any other female figures within the Doyle canon, continuing into modern adaptations. However, the original stories, particularly the short story case files, contain a cast of female characters serving a wide array of roles as clients, assistants, witnesses, accomplices, and even vigilantes. While diverse in scope, the case files highlight the drama of middle and upper-class marriage, struggles centered around the reality of Victorian-era values on love, marriage, and masculinity; the stories' critique focuses on the abuse of these values for personal gain by male figures and the need for Sherlock Holmes to remedy the situation. The typical resolution of these cases will have Sherlock Holmes restore a rightful marriage and reassert Victorian values by punishing the men who abused their authority, setting things back to a proper social norm as a parental figure who defends society (as he himself states in "Copper Beeches"). However, the situation becomes complicated when dealing with a female character who has crossed the law on these marriage matters. Despite Watson's criticism of Holmes taking little notice of women, the detective will, on multiple occasions, defy the law for their sake by refusing to punish a female criminal in recognition of some failure in English society.

Furthermore, Holmes's interventions in these affairs grow more and more stark as the case files progress, with his encounters with these women growing from mere summaries in *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1891-1892) and *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (1892-1893), to full interrogations within the later cases of *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* (1903-1904). However, throughout all these short stories in or adjacent to the Victorian era, the detective's seemingly progressive attitude is held back by his need for control, reaching all the way back to Irene Adler in the first short story, "A Scandal in Bohemia." While his encounter with Adler changes his viewpoint towards women, making him more likely to intercede on their behalf as

with Miss Doran (“Noble Bachelor”), Effie Munro (“The Yellow Face”), and the avenger in “Charles Milverton”, his desire to resolve things in his own perfect way (and prove his deductive method) will come into conflict with several of the criminal figures, like Anna (“Golden Pince-Nez”), Lady Hilda (“The Second Stain”), and Lady Brackenstall (“Abbey Grange”), who distrust masculine authority, forcing the detective to stymie his own ego to make the correct choice.

Sherlock Holmes, especially in the original stories, is a series of contradictions. On one hand, Holmes lives the life of an outcast, isolated from the streets of London or any hope of marriage and children (much to Watson’s dismay), whiling the hours away upon the violin or stimulating his mind with cocaine. On the other, this outcast is an essential engine of the law, and despite his reclusive status, Holmes is “not a plodding, ordinary policeman, but a brilliant sleuth of upper-class origins,” a hero who protects society, but is not bound to the law (Nicol 191). Holmes will seek creative solutions to his cases that “police, bound by convention” cannot, but those solutions are not radical shifts, but a realignment, a course-correction under his guiding hand. More importantly, Holmes’s bourgeois status grants him full access to the shifting city of London, where he can serve as an authority on the social and economic upheaval of the late Victorian period, with both women and marriage at the center of it.

The focus on middle and upper-class marriage within the Doyle stories stems from a historical reality of the Victorian period. Traditional aristocracy and nobility were slowly wasting away: “Throughout the century the traditional aristocracy either had to adjust to the realities of an industrial economy through investment or marriage,” and the emerging middle-class blended together with the remnant of upper-class society (Longhurst 58). Marriage was the primary method to secure (or acquire) wealth, with women serving as bargaining chips within this class drama. However, Victorian marriage was also bound up in heightened concerns of

sexual morality: the 1880s and onwards had a notable movement of “female moral reformers”, who led “public opinion against a privileged class of sexually dangerous men who preyed on the innocent...provoked a heightened sense of sexual antagonism, and reinforced assumptions of sexual difference, particularly...the association of sexual desire with maleness” (Walkowitz 6). In London, women were “considered to be endangered and a source of danger to those men who congregated in the streets...bearers of meaning rather than makers of meaning” (Walkowitz 22-23). They were forced to bear a “dual male image of woman as Madonna and whore”, saint or sinner, with nothing in-between (Longhurst 64).

Sherlock Holmes is embroiled in this discourse. On one hand, he will face down numerous villains who exploit women and marriage for their own gain. On the other, in several of these cases, “women are represented as gullible or virtually passive damsels in distress rescued from a 'Gothic' world by Holmes the chivalrous knight errant,” which underscores the “patriarchal structures of power and the moral virtues of 'innocent' marriage” (Longhurst 53). And, to an extent, that is true, as many of the happy endings throughout the case files involve a restored marriage thanks to the brilliant deductions of Sherlock Holmes. Even so, Holmes grows increasingly critical of Victorian practices as the case files progress. He initially appears to endorse the “new heterosexual norm” of the era, but his encounters with female criminals adds surprising nuance to a detective who will find himself exonerating the women who have been cheated by Victorian ideals (Walkowitz 5).

It comes as no surprise, then, that the overwhelming majority of female criminals (often doubling as victims) within these stories are affected by a poisoned or troubled marriage of some kind, but what separates them from their “innocent” counterparts is that these characters have taken or endorsed direct action to remedy their situation. Now, while Holmes will consistently

save “women from threats to their financial, emotional, and sexual lives,” the situation grows murky when the female character is embroiled in a crime (as either the accomplice or the perpetrator) (Gillis 76). When the law is against Holmes, resolutions become complicated, and Watson’s own pen will express anxiety over his decisions in the later cases of “Charles Milverton” and “Abbey Grange”. With only few exceptions, “female criminals tend to evade the justice that falls on their male counterparts” in the Holmes canon (Tambling 116). That being the case, the steps Sherlock Holmes will take to resolve these matters of love and marriage will eventually go beyond the need to prove his deductive method, and often incite Holmes’s emotions (and Holmes will show a consistent disregard for what the letter of the law says should be done). His sensitivity to the subject may stem from both his first short story in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892), and the detective’s first defeat: “A Scandal in Bohemia”.

When discussing women in the Doyle canon, it is impossible to avoid a discussion of Irene Adler. Interestingly, her portrayal in post-Doyle media is in stark contrast with her role in the original case. Both the Hollywood and recent BBC adaptations of the detective paint her as a love interest and rival Holmes must eventually overcome, but Adler’s actual motivation in the original story is to secure a life of happiness for herself with the middle-class lawyer, Geoffrey Norton, and she is willing to blackmail royalty to ensure her success. This leaves Sherlock Holmes as her unfortunate obstacle to freedom.

“A Scandal in Bohemia” both highlights Holmes’s ego and changes his approach to criminal women in later cases. Hired by the king of Bohemia himself, Holmes is tasked with retrieving scandalous photographs in the possession of Irene Adler, whom the king had an affair with years ago. To his credit, despite the king’s insistence about jealousy, Sherlock Holmes realizes that the case hinges on a gross misunderstanding; Adler does not blackmail the King of

Bohemia out of twisted love, but to ensure the king does not chase her: “I keep it only to safeguard myself, and to preserve a weapon that will always secure me from any steps which he might take in the future” (*Adventures* 204). Holmes settles on a double resolution by convincing the king Adler has “no reason she should interfere with your Majesty’s plan”; but he also attempts to steal back the pictures to ease his fear and perhaps show off his skill to a royal client (203). Holmes “aggressively violates” Adler’s hiding place, tearing up her home to secure his evidence; the use of violent language as he “rushes”, “tore back”, and “plunged” with his hands has “overtones of rape” with an added layer of irony: the picture he has obtained is not the intended evidence, but rather Irene Adler in a night dress (Gillis 74).

Holmes’s intentionally leaves the evidence in the hiding place, so “it might be a satisfaction to his Majesty to regain it with his own hands” (202). He is open to the idea of Adler and his Majesty encountering each other, but notes “it is probable that when she comes, she may find neither us nor the photograph” (202). Thus, he does not place much stock in reconciling the King and Adler, only doing just enough to ease the fears of his client (who misunderstood her situation). His half-hearted attempt to placate both parties, straddling the line of the law and personal moral codes, backfires, resulting in an uncommon loss of control for Sherlock Holmes.

Much has been said of Holmes’s blindness to Adler’s disguise (sealing his defeat), and the honorary title of “*the woman*” heaped upon her shoulders at case’s end. The ironies are numerous: the master of disguise and acting, whose “expression, manner, his very soul seemed to vary with every fresh part” and whose keen perception is his defining trait, cannot penetrate the simple cross-dress of Irene Adler, who herself was “an actress”, a fact Holmes was well aware of before their encounter, as he had a list of her operatic accolades preserved in a file (*Adventures* 199). This mistake is doubly damning because Adler sees through Holmes,

commenting in her letter, “Male costume is nothing new to me. I often take advantage of the freedom it gives” (204). The woman outside of Victorian values seemingly confounds our detective, even though her situation is like many others in the Doyle canon, centered around marriage struggles Holmes will find himself overly familiar with. Pointedly, “A Scandal in Bohemia” occurs early in his career, and Watson notes: “He used to make merry over the cleverness of women, but I have not heard him do it of late” (206). This line is significantly more striking than Adler’s title (the woman), and implies Holmes has indeed reflected upon his actions and biases. Now, arrogance is a trait that will never leave Sherlock Holmes, but the Holmes undefeated by Adler will likely give up on Lady Mary Brackenstall in the future, and not go out of his way to screen Lady Hilda in the *Return of Sherlock Holmes* series of cases. This ending sets the stage for some of his more decisive choices later, and his treatment of later female figures who are embroiled in a (usually well-meaning) crime.

There is one additional detail in “A Scandal in Bohemia” that foreshadows Sherlock Holmes’s future encounters. While in disguise, the detective accidentally saves the day for Norton and Adler, becoming their best man: “[the priest] absolutely refused to marry them without a witness of some sort” (*Adventures* 197). Holmes remarks, “it was the most preposterous position in which I had ever found myself in my life,” but quickly returns to plotting his theft of the letter (197). However, in spite of his opposition to Adler and his dogged pursuit of the evidence, Holmes successfully secures her marriage. Without intending it, Sherlock Holmes positively affects Adler’s life, and while he does not directly administer their marriage, he becomes their advocate (a position he will later embrace). Just as he serves as a witness in her marriage, the detective will bear witness to similar struggles in the future, but will take an active (rather than accidental) role in aiding the affected characters.

On rare occasion, the subject matter of a case will be made obvious: “Noble Bachelor” deals with a marriage gone astray, the disappearance of the bride in the midst of the wedding and the public scandal that unfolds. Contracted by the groom, Sir St. Simon, Sherlock Holmes steps into a complicated drama of old and new money, love and filial obligation, and the taunts of police inspector Lestrade who wants to push Holmes off the case. Miss Doran, the daughter of a wealthy gold-rush miner from California, flees her wedding when she learns her first husband still lives, but this creates a confused scandal. Inspector Lestrade arrests the dancer, Fiona Millar, for the disappearance of the would-be-bride Miss Doran, and his intervention creates the possibility an innocent figure might be charged.

Here, the law (and the papers) are quick to accuse Fiona because she was vocal about her love and desire for Sir St. Simon, and wrote down that desire in letters, an act which will become a recurring theme in these cases (350). Since she was angry at Miss Doran, the police make her the primary suspect on that knowledge alone. Despite Simon’s own objections, the police brand Miss Millar as a killer, punishing her for a public outburst of desire, to the point where Lestrade is trying to find explicit “evidence implicating Fiona Millar in the disappearance” not even entertaining the possibility he is wrong (352). Lestrade’s lament, “Whoever heard of such a mixed affair? Every clue seems to slip through my fingers. I have been at work on it all day,” emphasizes his blindness borne of Victorian biases. Holmes’s verbal jousting with Lestrade, a common occurrence as he strokes his own ego against a fellow detective far off the track, doubles as a criticism for the police’s swift, uncritical judgments against women. Lestrade’s misinterpretations, however, guide Holmes to the solution, illustrating the complicated relationship between Holmes and the law. Holmes tracks down Miss Doran and has a chance to

end the case right then and there, but instead he begins a bizarre intervention with his client, Sir St. Simon.

Interestingly, Holmes could have simply reported the truth to the man and allowed the matter to settle within the papers (Fiona Millar would be exonerated), but he instead calls his client over for dinner. He tries to convince Simon: "It is the purest accident...I can hardly see how the lady could have acted otherwise, though her abrupt method of doing it was undoubtedly to be regretted...you must make allowance for this poor girl" (354). This has little effect on Simon's mood: "I will make no allowance. I am very angry indeed, and I have been shamefully used" (354). Holmes then states he has brought an "advocate" and Miss Doran arrives with her legal husband.

In "A Scandal in Bohemia" Holmes encroaches on Adler's home with her nemesis, the king, in tow, but without any intention to negotiate, with the sole purpose being the pleasure of his client as he retrieves the photograph with his own hands. While he declares to the king Adler will not continue plotting against him, the thought of reconciling Adler with her old flame is far from the detective's mind. In fact, he maintains his disguise at all times and throws away the chance to even speak with Irene Adler with his mask removed. Here, in "A Noble Bachelor", Holmes tracks down Doran so she may speak out, and both client and offending lady are called to reconcile upon neutral ground: "we've had just a little too much secrecy over this business already. For my part, I would like all of Europe and America to hear the right of it" (355). Holmes did not steal from Miss Doran, meet her in disguise, or concoct a scheme to make her appear at his office at the exact time: he simply asked her to come over. After Miss Doran weaves the tale of her husband's false report of death, Holmes again presses Sir St. Simon to stay for a "friendly supper", prompting this reply: "I may be forced to acquiesce in these recent

developments, but I can hardly expected to make merry over them” (357). Simon’s reply heavily implies (along with the earlier conversation with Holmes) that, in his distress, he might have sought punitive action against Miss Doran, but Holmes believed (rightly) that his client could be talked down.

Now, Holmes frees both Fiona Millar (falsely accused) and Miss Doran (potential victim/instigator) from the wrong side of the law, but a few points are striking. Contrary to later cases (after *Adventures*), Holmes interacts with the women of the case briefly, and his encounter with Miss Doran is summarized. Second, Holmes describes his interaction as “paternal advice” with the offer to help settle affairs with the public and Sir St. Simon (358). This allusion to parenthood appears multiple times, with Holmes justifying Miss Doran by stating, “Having no mother, she had no one to advise her in such a crisis” (354). Does the bachelor of Baker Street who plays the violin to “while away these bleak autumnal evenings” now see himself as a parental figure to those harried by English society (360)? Miss Doran herself is described as “a tomboy with a strong nature, wild and free, unfettered by any sort of traditions. She is impetuous – volcanic...she is swift in making up her mind and fearless in carrying out her resolutions”, and thus would be willing to bear the consequences of slighting a nobleman if she was not convinced of another method (348). Holmes, however, ensures she does not need to face that burden, but it is difficult to judge the altruism of his motives when Watson’s pen denies us their dialogue together. Additionally, the resolution of this particular case shields a female character from unjust retribution, but places her on the correct side of the law in regard to marriage and fault. Judging by her earnest plea to reconcile with Simon, she also welcomed Holmes’s aid, and the reconciliation with Simon can also be seen as the greater good (Holmes helping his client move on). These factors will not always be in place for future cases.

On the subject of the detective's paternal advice, Holmes's preoccupation with parental imagery resurfaces in "Copper Beeches" within the same casebook. "Copper Beeches" contains a particularly dynamic female character, Miss Violet Hunter, who earns Sherlock Holmes's respect for her "manner", "speech", and "naturally observant" nature (381; 389). Miss Hunter serves as a second Watson (ever present) throughout the narrative, and the trio ultimately saves an imprisoned girl bound up because she stood to inherit over other members of her family. While this is yet another story with marriage elements, what makes the case striking is Holmes's rumination on the countryside. While Holmes does not hesitate to go around the law or condemn cruel social practices, he still believes in the overall framework: "the lowest and vilest alleys in London do not present a more dreadful record of sin than does the smiling and beautiful countryside" (Adventures 385). He continues:

"The pressure of public opinion can do in a town what the law cannot. There is no lane so vile that the scream of the tortured child, or the thud of a drunkard's blow, does not beget sympathy and indignation among the neighbors, and then the whole machinery of justice is ever so close that a word of complaint can set it going...look at these lonely houses, each in its own fields...think of the deeds of hellish cruelty, the hidden wickedness which may go on year in and year out." (384)

While the crime-infested city remains a perennial image in detective fiction going forward, Sherlock Holmes fears any place distant from either the law or a tight-knit community. Holmes's thoughts quickly turn to child and spousal abuse as he ruminates on evil, and explains why he gets involved in so many cases centered around the bonds of marriage. As noted before, his fear falls upon specific individuals who violate these norms, implying that it is a rotten few hiding away who poison the well of society. Holmes may not be a radical reformer, but he expends a

great deal of energy to correct society or the law when they have gone astray during a case, but that stems from his optimism about society and law, as he seems to believe society will move towards his viewpoint eventually. In this matter, he serves as a parent that steps in to correct or condemn a wayward child.

In some of the earlier cases, Holmes elucidates a problem in Victorian society, but does not attempt to solve it. Immediately after “Noble Bachelor”, Sherlock Holmes takes up the case of Mr. Holder, a banker who seeks to reclaim a priceless treasure, the titular “Beryl Coronet”. The character of Mary within “Beryl Coronet” provides an interesting contrast to Irene Adler: The Bohemian King presented Miss Adler as a criminal mastermind, only for Holmes to discover she acted out of self-preservation; Mr. Holder describes his niece, Mary, as the sunbeam in my house – sweet, loving, beautiful, a wonderful manager and housekeeper, yet as tender, quiet, and gentle as a woman should be” (*Adventures* 363). She wears the mantle of a perfect (but capable) Victorian girl, save for one key caveat: “In only one matter has she gone against my wishes. Twice my boy (Arthur) has asked her to marry her, for he loves her devotedly, and for each time she refused him” (363). We are given the detail that Mr. Holder and Mary “do not go out much”, but it is likely because Mr. Holder wants to keep his miracle worker at home (and close to his son), leaving her frustrated and vulnerable to a villain’s manipulation (364). Holder’s household has caretakers and maids, but Mary is permitted to dip her hands into the family business (and the servants get only the briefest mention as a background detail). Even so, Mr. Holder never sees Mary as a possible culprit for stealing the coronet (or realize that his trusted friend, Sir George Burnwell, has been seducing her), and would sooner accuse Arthur, blinded by Mary’s seeming Victorian virtue.

Mary plays the role of reluctant accomplice, but her chance at reconciliation is stymied by her distress over Sherlock Holmes's investigation. They have one direct interaction, and Watson remarks, "something like fear sprung up in the young lady's expressive black eyes" when she gleans his deductive prowess (369). Mary quickly flees the moment Holmes leaves to interrogate Arthur, and will not be present when the detective reveals the true nature of her lover:

"Neither you nor your son knew the true character of this man when you admitted him into your family circle. He is one of the most dangerous men in England—a ruined gambler, an absolutely desperate villain, a man without heart or conscience. Your niece knew nothing of such men. When he breathed his vows to her, as he had done to a hundred before her, she flattered herself that she alone had touched his heart. The devil knows best what he said, but at least she became his tool and was in the habit of seeing him nearly every evening." (373)

Holmes drops several biting insults upon Burnwell, making it clear to Mr. Holder that Mary was a victim in this whole affair, and loosely ties him (or at least his ways) to the devil for taking advantage of these women, language that will reappear when Holmes describes these kinds of criminals. But, Mary's absence from this reveal renders her fully beholden to men, jumping from the arms of a father figure to a silver-tongued charlatan.

However, Holmes does not act upon this knowledge, as he does in other cases. He not only allows Sir Burnwell to escape (albeit without the coronet), but remarks "that [Mary] is wherever Sir George Burnwell is. It is equally certain too that whatever her sins are, she will receive a more than sufficient punishment" (376). While he spares her any threat of the law (he would need to arrest them both), he leaves her to face a harsh lesson about love and lying men. Miss Mary is no longer confined to serve Mr. Holder or forced to deal with the marriage

advances of Arthur, but her freedom from the house comes at a steep cost: bondage to a lying drunkard. Logically, bereft of the prized coronet, Sir George Burnwell will find little use for Mary and flee, but Holmes's judgment on the matter is dispassionate, and the villain, though humiliated, will strike again. The Holmes of *Adventures* is humbled by Adler and starts to extend a hand towards female criminals, but only within the context of the case and his client. We are not (or at least rarely) privy to his conversations and interviews with these characters, which are seemingly unworthy of Watson's pen.

A slight shift in this attitude occurs when moving into the cases of *Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (1894). The ending of the "Musgrave Ritual" bears a similarity to "Beryl Coronet". The female perpetrator, Rachel, kills a former lover who "engage[d] her as an accomplice" to thievery, letting him die in the middle of their heist. Like Mary, Rachel is left at large with only "the memory of her crime to some land beyond the seas" (*Memoirs* 475). However, there is a key difference: Rachel committed murder, not theft, and Holmes takes an unusual pleasure in describing her actions. Holmes opens by saying, "A man always finds it hard to realize that he may have finally lost a woman's love, however badly he may have treated her," but offers no further consolation for the victim (472). He then describes the murder with a passion that nearly inserts himself into the moment: "what smoldering fire of vengeance had suddenly sprung into flame when she saw the man who had wronged her – wronged her, perhaps, far more than we suspected – in her power?" (473). He further imagines "muffled screams...the drumming of frenzied hands against the slab of stone which was choking her faithless lover's life out," a vivid picture that indulges in the victim's suffering, to the point where his own client goes pale in the face (473).

Violent judgment falls upon one of those high-class “sexually dangerous men” of Victorian London, and Holmes revels in it. His pleasure seems a fair way removed from the detective who let Sir George Burnwell escape when he had him at his mercy. Adding to that, during the denouement of “Musgrave Ritual”, he even suggests that the death could have been accidental, detaching Rachel from the crime even as he viciously describes it (Walkowitch 6). Downplaying her involvement ensures she will not be chased, but once again, Holmes does not directly interface with Rachel. He leaves her vengeance as a lingering mystery, albeit one where justice was served, leaving her silenced in the same vein as Mary.

Another change in Holmes’s viewpoint towards women and these crimes can be seen in “The Yellow Face”. A relatively well-off merchant, Grant Munro (Jack), comes to Sherlock Holmes to investigate his wife Effie’s clandestine meetings at a snow-laden cottage. Munro emphasizes Effie’s love and loyalty towards him, but the terrifying face he saw in the window (and Effie’s insistence on keeping this secret) has him worried. Holmes, for his part, says that this bump in Munro’s marriage is indeed serious, and once Holmes learns that Effie had a prior husband (assumed dead) before Grant Munro, he forms an immediate hypothesis: Effie’s first American husband “developed some hateful qualities”, and she left him to find a better life. Her pleasant escape is ruined by either the reappearance of this husband or some “unscrupulous woman” who hunts Effie down and blackmails her (*Memoirs* 428). Interestingly, he notes that this ex-husband may have “contracted some loathsome disease...become a leper or imbecile,” noting that Effie’s choice to leave may also be a sexual one, an exceedingly rare admission in Victorian times, especially since he is painting her in a (relatively) positive light to Jack (Danielová 23). Still, Holmes has no basis for his claim other than Munro’s testimony and his own personal experience as a detective; many of Holmes’s theories are a combination of

“reasoning backwards, supposition, and guesswork” but he presents his theory as a certainty to Grant Munro (Nicol 186).

Of course, Holmes prepares Jack for a showdown with some remnant of Effie’s dastardly first husband, despite it being “all surmise” (*Memoirs* 428). The detective no doubt had his own speeches and solutions prepared for the fictitious villain, noting just before the reveal, “legally we are putting ourselves hopelessly in the wrong, but I think that it is worth it”, in order to break Effie from her (assumed) struggle (429). This time, Holmes is willing to do more than explain the problem (avoiding a direct confrontation), but will set things right with his client in tow (albeit as two men prepared to fight another man for the sake of a woman who told them not to). The truth, however, makes Effie unique among all female characters throughout the case files: Effie’s first AND second marriage were happy couplings, despite the intense pressure of the original marriage (an interracial elopement). Her fear centered around Jack’s acceptance of her mixed-raced child, fears that prove unfounded when he “lifted the little child, kissed her, and then, still carrying her, he held his other hand out to his wife and turned towards the door” (431). Grant Munro is ashamed that he made Effie think he would chase the child away, and adds: “I am not a very good man, Effie, but I think I am a better one than you have given me credit for being” (431).

Holmes is humbled by his error, and instructs Watson to say “Norbury” (the location of this case) whenever “I am getting a little overconfident in my powers” (431). Instead, Holmes must admit that even his method requires physical evidence to work (rather than oral testimony). Holmes showed a willingness to break the law for the sake of Munro and Effie (and so eager to confront a blackmailing villain that he invents their backstory) but his single-minded pursuit of his own solution blinds him to the truth. However, the assumption Holmes makes speaks to the

reality that faces most women. A troubled marriage, a villainous husband or lover, blackmail and extortion: the devil's cocktail he hands Grant Munro belongs to numerous female figures throughout the Doyle canon, but Effie is a fortunate exclusion. A majority of husbands will pale in comparison to Grant Munro, and later stories will prove that Holmes's cynical assumption was more than conjecture, forming the crux of numerous cases.

Compare this to a much later case in *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*, written just a few years after the end of the Victorian era in 1901: The case of Charles Milverton introduces several female figures, with the unnamed one serving the key role – one that usually falls to Sherlock Holmes. The titular villain, Milverton, specializes in blackmail, specifically targeting upper-class women. Milverton intercepts love letters and conversations that could cause scandal, and then forces his victims to either pay up or risk their reputation. At the start of the case, Holmes laments the villainy of Milverton, noting him as “the worst man in London...I've had to deal with fifty murders in my career, but the worst of them never gave me the repulsion I have for this fellow” (*Return* 113). Although Holmes has been known to build up his own villains in relation to himself (Professor Moriarty receives pages of praise for his intellect), here Holmes finds a special revulsion. He admits that the crimes of Milverton are not particularly grisly, but offend him on a personal level, causing Holmes's to describe Milverton as a venomous snake (113). Now, it is not uncommon for criminals to be referred to as “wild beasts” in these stories or to have specific traits such as a “cruel, hard gash upon the face, compressed, inexorable, and terrible” (Cranefield 90). Indeed, Milverton will wear a “perpetually frozen smile” befitting of his line of work, but normally these descriptions only appear in passing (*Return* 114). Holmes, however, will not let the comparison slide, calling Milverton “as cunning as the Evil One”, linking his serpent status to the root of evil itself (114).

Victorian Era values are on full display here as women “[were] not believed or encouraged to have any sexual appetite whatsoever” (Danielová 23). These letters could mention only a passing fancy or even heartfelt gratitude, but that could be enough to endanger a proposal and sully a woman’s reputation. Holmes confirms that these female victims cannot face him for “what would it profit for a woman, for example, to get him a few month’s imprisonment if her own ruin must immediately follow?” (*Return* 114). Since society will view these women as guilty, the courts will only truly censor Milverton if he accidentally blackmails someone “innocent”. Now, Holmes does see the actions of his client, Lady Eva Blackwell, as “imprudent” and does not suggest anything terribly radical about Victorian marriage, but he views society’s punishment of the crime as blatantly cruel (worse than murder), and he is willing to commit burglary to set things right (116).

But that’s where the line gets blurry. To conduct his plan, Holmes seduces Milverton’s servant, Agatha, and Watson is the one who raises a moral objection: “Surely you have gone too far...but the girl, Holmes?” (117). Holmes waves him off saying “you must play your cards as best you can when such a stake is on the table”, informing Watson that there are others who will pursue Agatha after the case ends (117). Agatha herself never actually appears in the story; she is merely a name whose activities are reported via male characters. Is Holmes merely focused on the case, or not giving her much concern due to her lower status? Although he champions a righteous cause, he uses identical language to Milverton when describing Agatha, referring to her as a card while Milverton sees women as a collection of profitable letters (118). As in many detective stories, we have a moment where hero and villain reflect one another, especially with Holmes serving as a thief for much of the case. His ego is still very much apparent, motivated by Milverton’s own insults in their first encounter: “I have been expecting you to do something

original...your supposition that I would bring the letters here in the notebook is entirely mistaken” (116). With his deductive method insulted, Holmes stakes his own pride on the case: he inserts himself into Milverton’s role so he can thoroughly defeat him, conducting espionage to upstage his enemy completely.

The ending, however, is fairly unique among the case files. While it is not uncommon for the criminal to be killed or subdued by their own dastardly ways, Holmes plays no part in Milverton’s demise. Milverton meets with a former victim disguised as his informant. He attempts empty threats, stating he cannot be “bullied” and that his servants will subdue her, but this produces “a deadly smile” from her lips (123). She cries out, “You will ruin no more lives as you ruined mine. You will ring no more hearts as you wrung mine. I will free the world of a poisonous thing”, and with a “gleaming revolver” she empties “bullet after bullet” point-blank into Milverton’s chest (123). On one hand, with a seemingly holy weapon and a reappearance of the serpent language, she is an avenging angel smiting the devil for the good of all. On the other, she carries out a brutal execution that only ends when her revolver has no more bullets to spare, which she follows up by “[grinding] her heel into his upturned face” (123). She is not overcome by emotion or the horror of her action: she coldly confirms his death and swiftly escapes before the servants arrive.

And both Holmes and the narrative support her. When Lestrade gives Holmes a chance to take the case (and potentially erase evidence of his own breaking and entering), he firmly declines: “...there are certain crimes which the law cannot touch, and which, therefore, justify private revenge...my sympathies are with the criminals rather than the victim, and I will not handle this case” (125). The story ends with a smiling Holmes finding the picture of the avenging woman, and coyly telling Watson to keep things quiet with a finger to his lips. With

Watson dragged along, this is an instance where Holmes can still prove his superior intellect to his companion without interfering with the case. However, while we know that they know her identity, the name remains unspoken. This allows her to function as a stand-in for all of Milverton's victims, but it also denies her the chance to be a full character like Irene Adler (it's difficult to remember a character without a name). The avenger possesses both resilience and cunning to take down Milverton and evade capture, but we know nothing of her personal life save for the death of her husband (heartbroken through the blackmail). Now, while Holmes does not get to speak with her directly, her long speech against Milverton already grants her more spoken dialogue than most female figures. She serves as a stand-in for Victorian women, caged by societal standards of virtue and predatory men, but her story still revolves around her husband who dies as a result of her impropriety. Justice is equated with revenge, giving readers "the pleasure of the text...the vicarious sense of witnessing justice in witnessing violence" (Tambling 122). This case serves as one of the strongest condemnations of Victorian standards, and gives a woman the power to destroy her oppressor (with the approval of Sherlock Holmes), but still centers a woman's role within the bounds of hearth and marriage. The avenger is allowed to build a life for herself again, but there is an implication she will remarry now that she is free of Milverton.

Continuing in the *Return of the Sherlock Holmes*, the case of the "Abbey Grange" gives us an echo of the criminal woman, but also a chance for Holmes to confront her. In this instance, the man worthy of Holmes's ire is the deceased victim, Sir Eustace, the abusive husband of Lady Mary Brackenstall. Unlike the previous case where Holmes deliberately avoided entanglement with the law, Holmes takes this case on the behalf of the Law, namely Inspector Stanley Hopkins, who has already contracted Holmes in different cases "seven times" and each case

“entirely justified” (191). Once again, Watson gives a detailed description of Lady Mary Brackenstall’s attire but even he catches her “quick and observant gaze...and the alert expression of her beautiful features, showed that neither her wits nor her courage had been shaken by her terrible experience” (193). Rather than pretend her husband a saint, Mary outright calls the marriage laws of England “sacrilege, a crime, villainy” and recounts Eustace’s constant drunkenness, all the while weaving a blatant lie about his demise (193-194). However, it appears that this honesty throws off Holmes’s insight; “the lady’s story was complete, and the maid’s collaboration was sufficient, the detail very exact” and only a hunch about a trio of wine glasses brings him back to the Abbey Grange. Once again, we have a female character wrapped within the Victorian marriage struggle who is exceptionally brilliant (and resolved) in her attempt to free herself.

As with the previous case, a female servant also exists within the case. Unlike Agatha, Theresa has spoken dialogue, and Watson (as narrator) has little praise for her: “stern Australian nurse – taciturn, suspicious, ungracious” (201). He notes that Theresa only speaks up due to “Holmes’ pleasant manner and frank acceptance of all”, underscoring Watson’s disdain for this servant woman by emphasizing the detective’s diplomacy (201). Theresa embodies the “outsider as a servant” stereotype that persisted throughout the era, but her explicitly foreign descent (rather than simply rural) allows her room for brash action (Pooley 410). She disparaged Sir Eustace when her Lady could not, and calls him “the devil” repeatedly, echoing the imagery used to describe Milverton (*Return* 210). She also informs Holmes that Eustace abused Lady Brackenstall to such a degree she would not speak of it to her own maid (but Theresa evidence based on the wounds she covered up) (210). Any time Lady Brackenstall is in danger Theresa leaps to her defense, often speaking before her lady can formulate a response. In fact, Theresa is

the one who jumpstarts this case, enlisting the aid of Captain Crocker to save Mary Brackenstall from her dismal fate: "I met Theresa Wright, her old maid. She told me all about her, about him, about everything...it nearly drove me mad" (206). In a way, Theresa seals the death of Eustace by intentionally bringing the old lover and tyrannical husband into conflict.

However, Theresa does not function as a character with her own desires; she is an extension of Mary Brackenstall, the "id" that reaches out and rebels on her behalf. The two of them are a collective "we", and Theresa only experiences suffering and desires on Brackenstall's behalf, echoing the hatred for Eustace that burns within her employer. Her importance to the case is based solely on her relationship with Mary in order to exposit the troubles of her marriage, and the two of them function as a supporting pair not unlike the duo of Holmes and Watson. She is the active voice of Brackenstall's suffering, just as Watson is the vessel that allows us to interpret Holmes when he is not directly speaking.

In that vein, we are finally shown a confrontation between Sherlock Holmes and a female criminal/accomplice, rather than having it reported. When Holmes confronts Mary Brackenstall with new evidence, he does not come as a mere accuser. When asked if this is a cross-examination, he states "in the gentlest voice possible" that "I will not cause you any unnecessary trouble...I am convinced that you are a much-trying woman. If you will treat me as a friend and trust me, you may find I will justify your trust" (202). When Holmes reveals her testimony as false, "there was a hesitation in her beautiful face", but "some new strong thought caused it to set like a mask" (202). Brackenstall finds herself unable to trust Holmes (who at this moment represents the law), but maintains her composure to prevent him from uncovering the true culprit. While her efforts fail, Holmes lives up to his Milverton creed when he encounters the killer and star-crossed lover, Captain Crocker. He disassembles and tells Crocker that while "A

British jury” will decide his fate, he will allow him the chance to disappear; Crocker immediately refuses because Mary will be held as an accomplice (206). Holmes triumphantly replies, “I was only testing you, and you ring true every time” and proceeds to make himself the judge and Watson the jury (207). They both declare Crocker “Not Guilty” and Holmes states, “Come back to this lady in a year, and may her future and yours justify us in the judgment we have pronounced this night” (207). Yet again, the criminal (and the Lady) are pardoned, for the victim was a tyrant enabled by harsh marriage laws and crushing social norms that left the pair without an escape. Even more explicit, they declare “*Vox populi, Vox Dei*” or “the voice of the people is the voice of God” bringing a holy triumph over the “devil” of the late Sir Eustace (207). Adding to that, this is “language incarnating the law of the father, the law of patriarchy”, another echo of the paternal Holmes who has a higher authority than the letter of the law (Tambling 120). Once again, the silence of the detective allows this happy (though technically guilty) couple to flourish.

But what makes the case interesting is that this moment almost did not happen. Rather than immediately confront Jack Crocker, Holmes took the information to Scotland Yard and was a mere step away from an official warrant. However, “I couldn’t do it Watson...once that warrant was made out, nothing on earth could save him. Once or twice in my career I feel that I have done more real harm by the discovery of a criminal than ever he had done by his crime” (203). While he eventually takes up Mary Brackenstall’s cause, he only does so through intense self-reflection, and notes, “I had rather play tricks with the law of England than my own conscience” (203). Holmes himself sees his resistance as a “trick”, reaffirming his positive view of the law within society, but seeing this tangled marriage as something he cannot (ultimately) abide.

It is quite the contrast from the Holmes who broke into Milverton's home and accepted vigilante justice without any dithering. Either Milverton's evil blots out any doubt, or Holmes's ego was bruised by Lady Mary Brackenstall's refusal of trust. Brackenstall was never his client after all, and to morally succeed in this case, he must intentionally fail to discover the culprit. He must begin a careful balancing act, isentangling himself from Hopkins while still providing the expected hints and updates: "what I know is unofficial, what he knows is official. I have the right to private judgment, but he has none. He must disclose all, or he is a traitor to his service" (204). But Mary's silence sends him a step away from Scotland Yard. As part of his negotiation with Mary Brackenstall, Holmes states "...it is no use. You may have heard of any little reputation which I possess. I will stake it all on the fact that your story is an absolute fabrication" but when Mary maintains her innocence he first "gets up from the chair" and then at the final refusal "shrugs his shoulders" and leaves (202). It is a clear tactic of intimidation, and his dramatic "I am sorry" as he turns around is an attempt to provoke a "Wait!", but neither Mary nor Theresa give in to the pressure.

Here we are given a second glimpse of Adler's Holmes, a silent assumption that the woman will fall to his well-intentioned manipulations. While the failure does not threaten the case, it does wound his masculine ego. In other instances Holmes saves women "from various threats to their financial, emotional, and sexual lives" but does so through either a "physical rescue" or a moment where he "produces the truth" (Gillis 76). Here, however, he will not be granted the personal satisfaction of a rescue or even the chance to prove his intellect to Mary Brackenstall. While he maintains a cool exterior, Holmes heads to Scotland Yard in a huff, and he only stops when he recognizes the damage he will cause, "with his brows drawn down, lost in profound thought" (*Return* 203). Even then, the story stays focused on Jack Crocker after this

scene, and Holmes will only refer to Mary Brackenstall as “this lady” post-rejection, while Crocker has no trouble speaking her or Theresa’s name (207). The fact that Holmes threatens Crocker with a police whistle to secure his testimony might be more than just an assurance he does not flee, but a sign that this case has placed no small strain on his patience.

And perhaps patience is a key term. “Abbey Grange” opens with a common disparagement of Watson narrative flair: “Your fatal habit of looking at everything from the point of view of a story instead of as a scientific exercise has ruined what might have been an instructive and even classical series of demonstrations” (191). His prior declaration of “the game is afoot” bellies Holmes’s particular excitement for this case, a chance to flex his absolute authority on matters of deduction that “grants him authority over [police] work in solving crimes, and thereby over the criminals of London” (Gillis 70). However, this same authority gives him a “substantive social mandate” over “justice and crime”, and while Holmes would love nothing more than to demonstrate his craft and add another example to his planned “textbook...on the art of detection in one volume,” he inevitably winds up in these moral quandaries better suited for Watson’s pen than his own (Gillis 70; *Return* 192).

The adventure preceding “Abbey Grange” gives some insight into Holmes’s moral struggles. Once again, legal husbands remain the consistent bane of women in Doyle’s stories: “The Golden Pince-Nez” gives us yet another in the guise of Professor Coram, a former Russian revolutionary who “in order to save his life and earn a great reward...betrayed his own wife and companions” (*Return* 170). Said wife, Anna, does not seek vengeance, but a method to save an innocent victim of his betrayal, Alexis, “noble, unselfish, loving – all that my husband was not” (171). Coram, jealous that her affection (just a few letters, but Milverton reveals how important those can be) falls upon Alexis, guarantees he will suffer in a Siberian prison colony. The case

operates on a tragic twist: Anna has a moral imperative to save Alexis, but she accidentally commits murder when trying to steal back the documents (a struggle with a servant gone wrong), leaving her with no choice but to blackmail her husband into keeping quiet until she can escape. This, of course, sets Sherlock Holmes on the trail at the behest of Inspector Hopkins.

Although Anna is a foreign woman, the crux of the case still centers on her connection to the wealth of Professor Coram, whose opulence, cigars, and servants are bought by betrayal. In case there was any doubt as to his villainy, he states “Susan [his maid] is a country girl...and you know the incredible stupidity of that class...she twisted the [dying words] into a meaningless message” invalidating her testimony on that basis alone (166). Holmes quickly deduces the death as an accident, but when he uncovers Coram’s secret Watson states: “I observed Holmes’s eyes were shining and his cheeks tinged with color. Only in a crisis have I seen those battle-signals flying” (168). While Watson’s description paints a vivid picture of Holmes’s verbal jousting with Professor Coram, it emphasizes that Holmes does not know what will happen as a result of his accusation: “what your motives are, or what exact part you play in this strange business, I am not yet able to say” (168). The detective’s passionate dive into the unknown is stymied by Anna, who does not wait for Holmes to reveal her hiding spot, and comes out of her own volition. Immediately, Holmes notes her “ghastly color” and changes his tone; he tries to stop her confession, noting, “I am sure it is the truth. I fear that you are far from well” (170). Halfway through the speech, he attempts to summarize her confession so she might stop, but she quiets Holmes with “an imperative voice” and continues on (171). Holmes finally sees the poison phial in her hand and “bounded across the room” to prevent her death, only to discover she had already consumed the contents. Holmes’s efforts to assert control and expose the truth lead to Anna’s

death, and with her dying breath she demands that the listeners forward the evidence to free Alexis.

For a moment, Holmes seems completely unaffected by Anna's death, and he recalls the unraveling of the mystery with a degree of fondness. However, he is currently traveling with Inspector Hopkins, and leaves him with this response, the final line of the story: "I congratulate you on having brought you case to a successful conclusion. You're going to headquarters no doubt. I think, Watson, you and I will drive to the Russian Embassy" (173). Holmes implies that Hopkins will only be concerned with the resolution of the murder to satisfy Scotland Yard, and the use of "you" and "your" detaches Holmes from the affair. This word choice, coupled with a "congratulations" for a case solved solely by Holmes adds a sardonic bite to his farewell, underscored by the "no doubt", a veiled criticism of his loyalty to the law. For Sherlock Holmes, the case is only complete with the fulfillment of Anna's will and the freeing of Alexis, regardless of their country of origin.

With that pointed retort in mind, Holmes's decision to leave Hopkins without a solution in "Abbey Grange" and to (reluctantly) side with Brackenstall makes sense. While there are certainly other cases where Holmes might reflect "I have done more real harm by the discovery of the criminal" than the crime, "The Golden Pince-Nez" would be fresh in his mind, with Anna's suicide serving as a prime example of what might happen should the truth be brought into public light. After all, Hopkins is a man of law through and through, and will not risk his position out of sympathy for a criminal. Holmes correctly envisions the suffering that will result from passing along that solution. This could also imply recognition that his excitement in bringing down Professor Coram (and thus proving his method) blinded him from seeing further consequences.

The concluding adventure of *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* contains a story presented as a profound international incident hidden from view “only to be published when the time was ripe” after Sherlock Holmes had officially retired (*Return* 208). The story builds up the possibility that an ill-advised letter will spark world war between the powers of Europe if it is published, feeding on the global tension already in the air in the year of 1904. Holmes is stymied by the case, Watson noting, “He ran out and ran in, smoked incessantly, played snatch on his violin, sank into reveries, devoured sandwiches at irregular hours...it was evident to me things were not going well for him or his quest” (216). However, despite the dramatic backdrop, “Second Stain” is not at all different from preceding cases, hitting several of the same beats as the perils of marriage and purity nearly ignite a war.

The entire case moves on a domestic misunderstanding, placing Lady Hilda in the spotlight. The spy, Eduardo Lucas, blackmails Hilda into handing over the threatening document, copying the modus operandi of Charles Milverton by threatening to unleash “an indiscreet letter before my marriage, a foolish letter of an impulsive, loving girl. I meant no harm, and yet he would have thought it criminal” (224). With her husband Trelawney Hope’s high standing as a diplomat, his own opinion is irrelevant: honor and society would demand her censure and his public disgrace, and she implies that her husband would be heartbroken over this act (he is not a Grant Munro). However, Hilda did not realize her husband had made a fatal faux pas and thought the letter trade sufficient to save their marriage. But, in a moment of irony, Lucas has his triumph snatched away in almost the exact same fashion as Milverton, stabbed through the heart by a different woman he long manipulated, who assumed Lady Hilda was another secret lover (225). Hilda reclaims the document, but does not know how to return it without causing an entirely different scandal from the one Lucas threatened.

We see an echo of Holmes's encounter with Brackenstall as well. Holmes starts his interrogation by stating: "Come, Lady Hilda. You have the letter....my duty ends when I return the letter to your husband. Take my advice and be frank with me. It is your only chance" (223). When she refuses, he again "rose up from his chair" and gives his apology: "I am sorry for you, Lady Hilda. I have done my best for you. I can see that it is all in vain" (223). Hilda, unlike Brackenstall, reveals her secret, rushing forward on one knee and in tears: "Spare me, Mr. Holmes, spare me!" (223). Holmes immediately raises her up, thanks her, and promises to "screen [her]" from all consequences by spreading a blatant lie that the document was actually in the "dispatch box" all along. Several characters note that it is "inconceivable, impossible" and that "there is more to this than meets the eye", but Holmes calls it nothing more than a "diplomatic secret" and ensures Lady Hilda can live in peace (226-227).

On one hand, we see Holmes stays in authoritative control over a woman, but he ensures the female antagonist is shielded from the law by a situation society created (the focus on female purity and taboo expression of desire). In essence, this could be seen as an alternate ending to the "Abbey Grange" had Brackenstall confided in the detective, but that would undermine her character. Lady Hilda is a woman in a (relatively) happy marriage desperately trying to keep her life together, and her tears are a release of all these stressors and secrets intersecting: if Hilda kept sitting upon the letter, the anxiety of the British government would reach a boiling point, and her husband might be forced to resign anyway, creating another path to their ruin. Hilda herself notes: "I came to you that morning to understand the full enormity of my offense...I brought the paper back with me and thought of destroying it, since I could think of no way of returning it without confessing" (225). What Hilda needs is a helping hand willing to shield her

from society's gross expectations of women, and that is something Holmes can provide while working to satisfy the police frantically searching for the letter.

Is there ego involved? Absolutely: "Every man's hand is against us, and yet the interests at stake are colossal. Should I bring it to a successful conclusion, it will certainly represent the crowning glory of my career" (219). But Holmes solves the case without a dramatic reveal of the truth, rejecting the opportunity to prove his method, and settling for a more mystical exit as Lestrade's police and the English diplomats debate Holmes's deception. One could argue he achieves more fame by leaving his highest-profile case a mystery (until Watson's latter-day publication), but his solution still protects Hilda first and foremost. Also, just as with "A Final Problem" at the end of *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*, this was intended to be his final case and another possible exit for the detective, but popular demand will see "His Last Bow" (1917) and *The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes* (1925) published as the true concluding set, one written in a different era (although *Return* is technically published in the short-lived Edwardian era, it is still synonymous with late Victorian; 1914, World War I, brings the massive societal shift). That being said, Holmes's negotiation with Hilda, the preservation of a (wanted) marriage, the ironic death of the blackmailer, and the liberation of a female criminal contain numerous echoes of prior cases.

By siding with Hilda, Holmes reverses his mistake of "A Scandal in Bohemia", and is content to leave both the law and his client in the dark so that individual happiness may be preserved. Holmes does not tear apart Hilda's room or trick her into leaving in disguise, but learns the truth through open dialogue we are privy to (instead of an off-to-the-side summary by Watson's pen). Now, Hilda's happiness is still one rooted in traditional societal values (a stable

marriage), but she is fully exonerated for expressing sexual desire and getting pulled into a scheme beyond her control.

And yet, the contrast between Lady Hilda and Lady Brackenstall is stark. Lady Hilda's resolution proves that Holmes was entirely forthright in his pledge to aid Lady Brackenstall during the interrogation (and would never have stepped near Scotland Yard if she told the truth), but Brackenstall is a woman who has endured years of physical and mental torture from her husband, to the point where the text refuses to reveal the full extent of her torment (she could not even speak of her injuries to Theresa). No matter how quiet or gentle his voice, no matter if he has valiant intentions, Holmes needs Brackenstall to break down and confess to him, risking her one chance at happiness should Holmes prove false. And, Holmes is not one for humility; by flaunting his reputation to get her true testimony, he echoes the arrogance of Sir Eustace who used his status as an excuse to commit crimes beyond domestic abuse, including, but not limited to, "drenching a dog with petroleum and setting it on fire – her Ladyship's dog" and "throwing a decanter at that maid" in public in "spite of all his wealth and title" (197). Holmes assumes Lady Brackenstall wants help, but not the help of a male figure representing the side of the law that failed to protect her from Eustace. While Holmes has changed from "A Scandal in Bohemia" he cannot gain her trust while presenting himself as an authority, patriarchal or not. Still, if Brackenstall's crime goes unsolved, no one else suffers, save for a minor hit to the reputation of the police or Sherlock Holmes. Brackenstall thus "operates inside and outside the law and a figure of ambiguity that Holmes cannot quite control or account for" (Tambling 122). Once Holmes constricts his ego, he can let her go without any consequence.

Despite his status as a social recluse, Sherlock Holmes is a staunch defender of Victorian London who normally trusts in society and the law, "an authority who works to counter and

disrupt other examples of transgressive masculinities” (Gillis 78). While “women are often protected by Holmes”, and the resolution of their problems still fits neatly within Victorian values, it also speaks to “the precarity” of their position in the late Victorian and Edwardian era (78). The criminal women of the canon, however, do not wait for a savior, and Holmes’s reaction to them gradually shifts over time. Although Holmes is sensitive to the struggle women face, there is a clear progression in Holmes’s treatment of criminal women from “A Scandal in Bohemia” to the end of “The Second Stain”, with all of their cases revolving around marriage or love in some fashion. Holmes goes from merely elucidating/witnessing their plight in Victorian society, but only occasionally intervening in their struggles (but still not speaking to them in a way the reader is permitted to see, limited by Watson’s summary), to expressing visceral disgust towards the men who created their situation, directly interrogating and siding with these women in matters of the law, regardless of the severity of their crime.

However, no matter how much character development Sherlock Holmes receives, no matter the lessons he learns by seeing his deductive method fail against Irene Adler or mistakenly create a false answer in “The Yellow Face”, he still struggles with his paternalistic ego, and while he might learn to eschew (some) glory for the sake of Lady Hilda, Brackenstall is the only female character to force him to make a moral choice without personal benefit or accolades. Holmes, reluctantly, passes that test, showing that the detective can step down from his lofty pedestal and recognize that just as the law he respects must occasionally be circumvented, so too does the pride of the detective of 221b Baker Street.

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