Doyle's Views on Women

Women's rights have come a long way in the last century—even in the last thirty years. What's more, women have begun to take on more active roles in literature, rather than being simple background characters, or a mere extension (property) of their husbands. Such is the case in Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* stories, wherein readers are introduced to a famous female antagonist, Irene Adler (also known as The Woman). However, while Doyle did readers the service of introducing formidable female characters, it is also important to note that these characters are few and far between. That is to say, for every Irene Adler, there is at least one Mrs. Hudson, who has few, if any, lines in the classic stories, and certainly never speaks of anything regarding her personal life or ambitions. This, of course, brings to mind the question of what, exactly, Doyle thought of women. Through his *Sherlock Holmes* stories, Doyle's views of women will be examined.

There is no pretending that the Victorian times are not sexist. While women have started to gain more rights (or at least start to fight for them), their lives are still very much defined by being someone's daughter or wife. On more than occasion, both Holmes and Watson make casually sexist remarks in a way that suggests they are not being deliberately prejudiced, but that this is how they think the world works. One need only take a look at stories such as "A Scandal in Bohemia," featuring Irene Adler, to see Holmes's casual sexism. After supposedly outwitting Adler by making her think her house is about to burn down, Holmes remarks to Watson, "When a woman thinks that her house is on fire, her instinct is at once to rush to the thing which she values most…. A married woman grabs at her baby; an unmarried one reaches for her jewel-box" (Doyle). Now, Holmes is not wholly inaccurate here, for it would surely be a

mother's priority to save her child. The second half of this statement, however, is quite problematic. One would think that Holmes, with his superior intellect, would know better than to dismiss women as frivolous creatures, but as readers are shown time and again, this is not the case. Of course, there are plenty of women who place great value on their jewelry, but not all of them do. Holmes's statement, then, is an overgeneralization. It seems Meghan Gordon is correct in her statement that the purpose of women in these stories is to "further the ingenuity of deduction of Sherlock Holmes in placing him in juxtaposition to female characters who are typically eccentric, sensuous, or silent" (Gordon). Given that Mrs. Hudson, Holmes and Watson's landlady, is given few, if any, lines of dialogue, it stands to reason that Doyle views his female characters as less important than the males.

However, as mentioned before, while Doyle is undoubtedly sexist in some ways, he is also the man who created the formidable Irene Adler—often given a larger role in modern adaptations as Sherlock Holmes's love interest, which is not at all accurate. Even still, she is worth taking a closer look at. Let us consider Adler's introduction in "A Scandal in Bohemia": she is blackmailing the King of Bohemia and is unwilling to make any kind of compromise. Given that she possesses photographs of herself and the king in "compromising positions," it is understandable that he would want these destroyed. Especially before his marriage. It is obvious that Adler should not be dismissed out of hand. She has proven herself as a force to be reckoned with when the king's men were unable to steal the photographs not once, but five times. And yet, on more than one occasion, that is what Holmes does: he dismisses her first by saying "It is quite a pretty little problem" (Doyle). This makes Adler seem trivial, even despite all of the trouble she has caused. Adler is more than "a pretty little problem." She is a woman determined to ruin the

king's marriage and reputation and deserves proper consideration because of this. Even Watson later on in the story, comments, "But she could not love him" (Doyle), upon hearing of Adler's marriage. Why does Watson seem certain that Adler could not love her husband? Well, the answer is quite simple: Adler breaks the mold of what a proper lady ought to act like. She is not docile in the least, as is shown by her threats against the King of Bohemia. No, Adler is a woman who knows what she wants, even if that is only to humiliate a man who once may have given her false promises. This unusual behaviour would not appeal to a man like Watson, who, upon first meeting his future wife, Mary Morstan, makes the following observation: "...her expression was sweet and amiable, and her large blue eyes were singularly spiritual and sympathetic" (Doyle). If one were to pit Adler and Morstan against each as foils, one would notice that, while not without any backbone, Morstan is more meek than Adler has ever been. And that is exactly what appeals to Watson.

However, Adler does get away with her scheme, the photos still in her possession by the end of the story. In a time that punishes women for the slightest offense, the fact that Irene Adler gets away with her crimes (and outwits Sherlock Holmes, no less) is unusual and gratifying.

While Adler does eventually gain some degree of respect, this does not change the fact that Adler is a problem that needs to be dealt with. As alluded to earlier, Doyle solves the problem in a way that has been common for centuries when it comes to women: by having her married. Marrying women off has been the solution to many problems. From forging an alliance, keeping money within a certain class or family, or avoiding the scandal of pregnancy outside of wedlock, marriage, for many people, is an end-all solution. And it is not a thing of the past, either. One need look no further than the popular movie *The Sound of Music* to conclude that this solution

lies not that far in our past—and indeed continues to exist today. And it is marriage that solves the problem of Irene Adler. For, while she manages to outwit Holmes by keeping the incriminating photograph of the king, she also writes to Holmes: "I love and am loved by a better man than [the king]... I keep [the photograph] only to safeguard myself…" (Doyle). Irene Adler may be The Woman to Sherlock Holmes, but this does not mean that he views her on par with men. Adler is an exceptional woman—not an example of her gender.

However, that is not to say that Holmes is never sympathetic to women. Perhaps his adventure with Irene Adler opened Holmes's eyes to the idea of women's intelligence—going beyond simple emotion. As Mari Isokoski puts it, "In the story Sherlock Holmes allows his views of women to blind him from realising that a woman is manipulating him" (71). If one is to take a look at Doyle's story, *The Sign of Four*, one will see that, during his first interaction with Mary Morstan, Holmes is entirely respectful without a hint of condescension. He even tells her, "You are certainly a model client. You have the correct intuition" (Doyle). Now, considering Morstan has come to Holmes because of her long-missing father and a strange letter regarding such, it would be well within Morstan's rights to become emotional about the entire affair. In that case, it is unlikely that Holmes would take Morstan as seriously as he does. While she is undoubtedly troubled, Morstan keeps her composure for the most part and thus elevates herself as a logical woman in Holmes's mind. And yet, one will find a similar phrase to "A Scandal in Bohemia": "Well, really, this is a very pretty little mystery" (Doyle). What, exactly, does Holmes mean by this? Is he trivializing Morstan's dilemma, in a similar fashion to the Irene Adler problem? Perhaps. However, to say something is "pretty" can mean that it is more than a little. It is possible that Holmes is simply expressing interest, although that is, of course, up for

debate. Either way, it seems this phrase only comes up when there is a woman involved in the case. Sherlock Holmes has some degree of respect for women (especially after Irene Adler), but he is still very much a product of his time.

A Victorian man he may be, but Holmes does not tolerate the unnecessary harassment of women—and neither does Doyle. When Violet Smith from "The Solitary Cyclist" comes to Holmes and Watson to say that she is being stalked every time she travels on her bicycle, there is something of interest here: first, Holmes, often seen as unfeeling and calculating, treats Smith's case with utmost seriousness. Watson, normally seen as the more sympathetic of the two, does not. In fact, he writes, "That a man should lie in wait for and follow a very handsome woman is no unheard-of thing.... he was not a very formidable assailant" (Doyle). The justification or dismissal of women being harrassed is, unfortunately, all too common, and that is what Watson is doing here. He is normalizing this abhorrent behaviour, while Holmes goes to great lengths to ensure that Smith can feel safe again. However, while this story is written from Watson's perspective, it is clear that Doyle himself is not excusing the harassment of women—nor the forced marriage ceremony Smith finds herself in later. If he, in any way, supported any of these actions, it is unlikely that Doyle would have Holmes take the case as seriously as he does, nor have the man who kidnaps her and forces her into marriage (for her money) killed. Although Doyle does reveal Smith's stalker, Bob Carruthers, was merely trying to protect her from that very marriage, he, at least, does not justify hostile stalking in the first place. An argument could be made that he still did not have the right to stalk Smith, but that is another discussion. What is interesting is the fact that Violet Smith rides a bicycle in this story, which is disliked by many for being a symbol of New Women, and not one person criticized her for it. Not only that but at one

point in the story, Smith turns her bicycle around and rides straight at her stalker with the intent of confronting him. Few male writers of this time would view women as so brave or independent, but Doyle seems to go against the common assumptions by giving at least some of his female characters strong wills.

Now, let us look closer at Gordon's suggestion that women in the *Holmes* stories are "typically eccentric, sensuous, or silent" (Gordon). As mentioned earlier, Mrs. Hudson is mentioned several times in the *Holmes* stories, but rarely, if ever, is given lines of dialogue. She is what one would call a flat character who is not in the least bit fleshed out. Many writers have taken advantage of this, making Mrs. Hudson sarcastic or motherly because there is not a character to stay true to. Perhaps this is not a sign of Doyle's overall view of women; it could be that he does not feel the need to flesh a landlady, of all people. This is fair, although modern writers have chosen to do more with Mrs. Hudson. However, there is one thing worthy of note in the *Holmes* stories (among other things): of all of the female clients that make an appearance, all of their problems involve a man in one form or another. It can, of course, be argued that men make up half the population and thus are likely to be involved in several crimes—whether as the criminal himself or the victim. However, is it really so impossible for a woman to blackmail another woman? Or for a woman to murder another woman? Indeed, it is not, and it is guaranteed it happens today, and in the Victorian ages. But let us look at the facts: Irene Adler turned to crime because she felt spurned by her previous lover; Mary Morstan comes to Holmes and Watson because someone has been sending her obscure messages about her father who went missing years ago; Violet Smith is being stalked and forced into marriage. Often, women are placed in the role of victim or side character in the stories in which they have dialogue. And in

every story, their problems revolve around a man. What, then, is the implication here? Perhaps Doyle thinks that a woman's husband, father, or brother are the most important things in her life. Either way, while Doyle seems to support women's ability to marry whom they choose, he is not entirely a feminist.

It is also true, it seems, that the women in the *Holmes* mysteries are "sensuous." Take Helen Stoner, for example. When she comes to Holmes and Watson, she freely admits, "It is fear, Mr. Holmes. It is terror" (Doyle) that makes her shiver. Of course, the men that come to Holmes are often there for incidences such as murder or blackmail, but it is rare that they admit to any feelings of fear—if they ever do. This casts women in a more weak and vulnerable light—someone who deserves sympathy and protection. Of course, there are many different views on these stories. Hadar Aviram believes that "Doyle casts women as victims and perpetrators of crime with equal frequency, and includes women in the roles of various neutral parties as well" (242). As someone who has read six of the original Holmes stories, as well as a fair few pastiches that strive to remain true to Doyle, it seems more accurate to say that women are, indeed, cast in a weaker light, described as slaves to their emotions. Any woman who shows bravery or does not commit a crime out of passion is rarity and deserving of some level of admiration. However, while Doyle undoubtedly shows a level of sympathy for women, it is worth noting that he is not a supporter of the women's suffrage movement. The right to freely marry, it seems, is much different than being able to vote. As Andrew Lycett puts it, "But this was a personal matter, whereas voting was a constitutional issue, about which he tended to be Conservative" (363).

So Doyle supports women's ability to marry whom they please. He even supports the idea of some women never getting married, to an extent. For surely it is better to be a spinster than marry a man one hates. His character, John Watson, had a total of six wives during his lifetime. He is what one might call a player. This is where the idea of women being silent comes into play. Now, it can be difficult to track down all of these wives, considering the *Sherlock Holmes* stories are not written in chronological order, and even when married, Watson spends an inordinate amount of time with his friend and partner, Sherlock Holmes. However, in an essay known as "Counting Watson's Wives" by Brad Keefauver, Watson's life is given close inspection that concludes he did, indeed, have many wives—including one before he even met Holmes. This is an interesting direction for Doyle to take, considering his views on marriage. Of course, it can be assumed that some of them died. That seems to be the case of Mary Morstan/Watson: "In some manner he had learned of my own sad bereavement, and his sympathy was shown in his manner rather than in his words" (Doyle). It is interesting that Morstan is not given more acknowledgement or mentioned by name, for that matter. Although perhaps it is not all that surprising. The *Holmes* stories have always been told through the perspective of Dr. John H. Watson. In effect, it is always supposed to be Sherlock Holmes and John Watson, partners for life. A wife gets in the way of this dynamic, as many readers would agree. Not only that but in the Victorian times, there is still a significant separation of spheres, the "man's world" and "woman's world" kept apart by a sharply drawn line. When Watson is with his friend and partner in crime-solving, he enters a man's world and prefers to focus on that rather than his wife (and children, if he'd ever been fortunate enough to have any). Not to mention that Holmes himself is not at all interested in marriage or family life. Beyond a few superficial questions, he is unlikely

to bring Watson's home life up at all. When a man goes out drinking with his friends (even in today's world), often many of them will leave the husband and father behind. The same can be said for Watson, as he easily slips into his role of Sherlock Holmes's Boswell.

To call Doyle a feminist might not be wholly accurate, but he is nonetheless quite progressive for his time. The belief that women should be allowed to marry whom they please is still a rather new one in the Victorian era. Never mind the idea of a woman never getting married, which, for some, is a fate worse than death. While it is true that Doyle does not support women's right to vote and seems to view some of his female characters as less important than the males, Doyle does, in some ways, show women as logical beings (albeit ones often ruled by emotion in some way), deserving of some form of autonomy. And in a time that still largely dismisses women, this is significant.

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