VIOLENT CRIME IN VICTORIAN ENGLAND: A GENDER ANALYSIS OF SHERLOCK HOLMES

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The work of Arthur Conan Doyle provides an insight into the mindset of the Victorian man and his understanding of women in connection with violent crime. The Victorian public was not quite ready to accept the belief that a woman could participate in a violent crime and not have something be wrong with her mentally. This is demonstrated in Doyle's work with Sherlock Holmes, most notably in "A Scandal in Bohemia," "The Adventure of the Noble Bachelor," and "The Musgrave Ritual." In all of these stories, with the exception of the "Musgrave Ritual," a woman acts as the perpetrator of the crime that Holmes is investigating. Out of these three stories, only one woman is the perpetrator of a violent crime, and her motives are explained as being caused by mental duress. This shows the mindset of the Victorian world clearly illustrated through the writings of Conan Doyle.

Conan Doyle was a product of the cultural environment in which he lived. His use of women as mostly passive actors in the stories of Sherlock Holmes clearly demonstrates Victorian ideas of domesticity. However, this was not the only way that Doyle portrayed women; he also portrayed a few as criminals, but only in ways that would have been seen as acceptable to the Victorian mind. In Victorian England women of good standing were not supposed to commit crimes, especially not crimes that were violent in nature. This is all clearly demonstrated in the work of Conan Doyle, who offers a view of gender ideals in relation to crime.

In many ways, Sherlock Holmes serves as a mirror for the attitudes of Victorian England in regards to women and their involvement in crime; as both victims and perpetrators. Sir

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Arthur Conan Doyle would rarely use a woman as Holmes' main antagonist. They would usually be the victims of crime or merely bystanders. When he did, these women were usually not the perpetrators of violent crime. In fact, the most notable female criminal in the annals of Sherlock Holmes was one Irene Adler, who was a blackmailer of an aristocratic former lover.[1] Doyle also seems to focus primarily on greed as a factor in most of his writing, ignoring sexual violence altogether. This mirrors the reluctance of the Victorian era to give any overt attention to sexual motivations. Overall, in Doyle's writing, women were seen as being more emotional, and incapable of the blatant degeneracy that men were capable of. This is a reinforcement of Victorian ideals, in which women involved in violent crime were seen as a "hideous perversion."[2]

In areas outside of crime Doyle reinforces the gender roles of the period with examples such as Watson saying, "Because you are within my reach again...these riches sealed my lips. Now that they are gone I can tell you how I love you."[3] Thus demonstrating how a man must be of the same social standing as the woman, or above her, for a match to be proper.

One of the hallmarks of the Sherlock Holmes series was deductive reasoning. Holmes would be faced with a baffling and intriguing case requiring his superior intellect to piece together clues and solve the case. Yet most of the engineers of the convoluted crimes that Holmes encountered were men. Women were rarely seen as capable of creating such ingenious plots as to challenge Holmes. However, this is not necessarily the case in Victorian England. In the 1880s there were a string of poisonings in Liverpool, masterminded by women with the intent of collecting life insurance pay outs; a plot which involved

[1]Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, "A Scandal in Bohemia" in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes: Volume 1*. ed. George Stade (New York, NY: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2003), 187-205.

[2]Judith Knelman, "Women Murderers in Victorian Britain," *History Today* 48, no. 8 (August 1998): 10.

[3]Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Sign of Four*, in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes: Volume 1*, ed. George Stade (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2003), 166.

men as pawns. In one case a man was used to pose as a woman's husband for his health inspection, and upon the inspection of the dead body the insurance agent realized that the dead man was not the one who had appeared for the insurance physical.[4] This scheme had come to light with the arrest of two women, Margaret Higgins and her sister Catherine Flanagan. These women had committed a crime that would have fit Doyle's standard motive for his fictitious criminals: greed. These two women had conspired to kill Thomas Higgins, whom they had insured with five different insurance societies for a total of 108 pounds and 4 shillings.[5] It was also suspected that Margaret had also poisoned Thomas' daughter Mary, and that the two women had also killed Catherine's husband along with Catherine's 22 year old son and an 18 year old female lodger in their home, all for the insurance money.[6] These women, and their suspected partners in crime, were perpetrators of violent crime; something which was supposed to be an anathema to their sex in the Victorian period, yet the public was not surprised by it because poisoning for insurance money was considered common place within the lower classes.[7]

Yet why is it that a crime such as this, in the writings of Conan Doyle, would not be committed by a woman, but as a rule would be committed by a man? Perhaps it was because that, while the act of poisoning for insurance money was common, it would be easier for the readers of Sherlock Holmes to accept if it was a man. After all, "male villainy was dismissed as an unfortunate remission,"[8] and for a woman to do such a thing an easily defined motive such as greed would not be enough to explain her actions. In the Victorian mind there would have to be a deeper problem that would cause a woman to betray her sex is such a way.

[4]Angela Brabin, "The Black Widows of Liverpool," *History Today* 52, no. 10 (October 2002): 3.

[5]Ibid., 1.

[6]Ibid., 2.

[7]Ibid., 6.

[8]Knelman, "Women Murderers in Victorian Britain," 10.

In the reality of Victorian England, if a woman committed a crime of violence, there had to be something psychologically and fundamentally wrong with her. Sherlock Holmes stories exemplify this belief. Every villain Holmes seemed to face was in complete and total control of their faculties, which was the only reason their crimes were worthy of his attention. The idea that there was something wrong with women who committed crimes are best demonstrated when cases of infanticide, and interestingly enough, shoplifting are examined.

In 1854 Mary Ann Brough slit the throats of six of her children, and then attempted to do the same to herself.[9] At the trial there was no debate as to whether or not Mrs. Brough had committed the crime, but whether or not she was insane.[10] Perhaps this is why female murderers were not, as a general rule, used by Doyle in Sherlock Holmes. The key to a Sherlock Holmes mystery was not just the solving of the crime, but the revelation of the motive and events that created the motive. With an insane antagonist, who generally tended to confess to the crime right away, there was not much of a story. However, only 12 percent of women charged with violent crimes, and 28 percent of women charged with murder (91 percent of which were successful), pleaded insanity.[11] Yet the view of society dictated that, "only an insane woman could have committed the crimes with which she had been charged"[12] in reference to murder. The rate of successful claims of insanity shows how ready Victorian society was to believe that a woman would have to be insane to kill another human being. These ideals were manifested in the fact that from 1840 through 1880, "out of sixty indictments not a single woman was convicted of the murder of a newborn child."[13] This is mirrored in Conan Doyle's work, in

[9]Jill Newton Ainsley, "'Some Mysterious Agency': Women, Violent Crime, and the Insanity Acquittal in the Victorian Courtroom," *Canadian Journal of History* 35 no. 1 (April, 2000) 2.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Ibid., 3-4.

[12]Ibid., 2.

[13]Martin J. Wiener, *Men of Blood: Violence, Manliness, and Criminal Justice in*

that his criminals were always sane, at least sane enough to understand what they were doing and what they would gain from their crimes.

Another aspect in which women were deemed insane in relation to crime was in the case of shoplifting. With the rise of consumer culture in Victorian Britain, came the rise of shoplifting, which was one of the first areas in which a woman's crime was seen to be an aspect of mental illness rather than criminality.[14] The use of the "Kleptomania" defense tended to be reserved for the middle class woman who found herself charged with shoplifting.[15] The concept that a respectable woman, who had been caught stealing something which she did not need, was an anathema to a society who could see no reason for a respectable woman to steal something which she could easily afford. Rather than look at the problems in society which created the problem of middle class shoplifting, the courts needed, "a new solution to this apparently rising tide of middle class crime. This solution was the marriage of criminal justice and professional medicine."[16] However, this indulgence of this criminal behavior did not extend to the lower classes, who were charged with the theft without the concept of kleptomania ever being considered.[17]

This mentality was surely known to Conan Doyle, which would help explain the lack of female antagonists in his stories. With such well defined examples of female insanity in reference to crime, it would be difficult for him to conceive of a perfectly sane woman who would be able to commit a crime that would be worthy of the attentions of Holmes. Shoplifting was surely not one of these worthy transgressions, because in the Victorian mind any middle class woman who was capable of such a crime

Victorian England (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 125.

[14]Tammy Whitlock, "Gender, Medicine, and Consumer Culture in Victorian England: Creating the Kleptomaniac," *Albion* 31, no. 3 (1999): 413.

[15]Ibid., 414.

[16]Ibid., 418.

[17]Ibid., 417.

would most certainly be considered mentally ill. This was also the case for instances of infanticide.

But what about the murder of a spouse? While the "Black Widows of Liverpool"[18] were surely prime examples of women murdering their husbands; their motives also fit in with the recurring motive of greed in Holmes. But, for Holmes, cases such as these were usually attributed to a man because of the implausibility in the Victorian mind of a woman being able to mastermind such a crime. However, there were motives that the Victorian mind would accept for a woman killing her husband, such as spousal abuse.

A woman who committed a murder in Victorian England was often seen as either insane, as illustrated by the realities of infanticide convictions, or the victim of a situation that she had been put into by a man. The "popularity of the scenario of a bad man seducing and abandoning naive women encouraged magistrates, judges, and juries to look for an evil man behind the poor unmarried girl"[19] certainly played a part. In fact, Doyle used this motive at least once, with the murder of Richard Brunton by Rachel Howelles in "The Musgrave Ritual."[20] However, this murder is only implied and never confirmed; there was the possibility that Brunton's death may have been an accident. Perhaps Doyle knew that the idea of a female killer in one of his stories would not go over well with his readership, and thus he decided to leave the ending ambiguous to avoid having a controversial criminal attributed to him.

However, with the motivation for the crime that Doyle gave Howelles, it would not have been seen as outlandish or unbelievable. Whenever a woman killed a former lover, the defense immediately began to put the male victim on trial.[21] This is demonstrated by the case of Annette Myers. Myers was acquitted of killing a former lover, a guardsmen, who was then

[18]Brabin, "The Black Widows of Liverpool," 1.

[19]Wiener, *Men of Blood*, 124.

[20]Doyle, "The Musgrave Ritual" in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes: Volume 1*. ed. George Stade (New York, NY: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2003), 461-475.

[21]Wiener, *Men of Blood*, 126.

painted as callous and manipulative; with the acquittal Myers was referred to as a "Heroic Criminal."[22] Also, when a woman who had poisoned her husband was hanged, people in the crowd shouted "murder" when the door opened on the gallows.[23]

It was not just the public who felt sympathy for women accused of a violent crime, in 1832 when Mary Ratcliffe was put on trial for having her lover kill her husband, her case was dismissed when a judge declared that the evidence against her was weak. Conversely her separately tried lover was sent to the gallows.[24] This may have influenced Doyle to refrain from using a woman as a killer, because she would generate so much sympathy from the reader. While the occasional criminal in Holmes' world was seen as having just reasons, they were still held responsible for their crimes. A female murderer was not held accountable in the society that Doyle lived in, so there would be no resolution or punishment for the killer woman. She would receive only be sympathy, which Doyle was conditioned to give her.

Doyle, like many of his contemporaries, also tended to ignore the existence of sexual violence. While the Victorian public would later be fascinated with the sexual aspects of the "Jack the Ripper" case, sexuality, let alone sexual violence, was not something that was an acceptable topic in upper class Victorian society. While Doyle would not often use a woman as a primary antagonist, he would use them as victims, with the motive of the antagonist being greed. Doyle focused on this because, in the Victorian mind, there could be no other acceptable motivation for mass produced fiction. In fact the idea of sex in Victorian society was that it was a marital duty, and not something that was done for fun.[25] Also, a young woman who had just been married, and had become pregnant, asked her aunt

[22]Ibid., 127.

[23]Ibid., 128.

[24]Ibid., 127.

[25]Joan Perkin, *Victorian Women* (Washington Square, NY: New York University Press, 1993), 51.

where the baby would come from.[26] While it cannot be ignored that the girl may have been monumentally dense, it does show that sex was not something that was discussed in polite Victorian society, and would thus never enter the pages of Sherlock Holmes. With the idea of sex being a duty there was no room to make it a crime; it would be out of the societal context to do so. Sexual crime did exist in Victorian England, but it was just not acknowledged as such.

While the idea of sexual crime would explode with the emergence of "Jack the Ripper" in London, it was not something that had really been acknowledged before then. In fact, sexual assault and rape tended to be tried as regular assault cases, or as affliction cases when a pregnancy was the result.[27] Apparently, sexual crime did exist; the Victorian mind simply did not want to acknowledge it. This might also explain the complete lack of sexual crime in the Sherlock Holmes stories.

However, no matter how much the Victorian reader was told that sexual crime did not exist, the end of the Victorian era saw a veritable explosion on the subject of sexual crime. In 1885 the *Pall Mall Gazette* printed "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon" which focused on the idea of a white slavery sex trade existing in London.[28] This sparked an immense upsurge in interest in sexual crime, with people actually mobbing the offices of the *Pall Mall Gazette* in hopes of getting copies of the paper.[29] The publication of this work actually seemed to wake Victorian England up to the public acknowledgement of sexuality, and is credited with the passing of an age of consent bill.[30]

This was published during the period that Doyle was writing Sherlock Holmes, and "Jack the Ripper" was terrorizing London, yet sexual violence does not stray into the pages of

[26]Ibid., 52.

[27]Shani D'Cruze, *Crimes of Outrage: Sex, Violence and Victorian Working Women* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1998), 19.

[28]Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late Victorian London* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 81.

[29]Ibid.

[30]Ibid., 82.

Holmes. Perhaps this is because Doyle was a product of the more sexually prudent early Victorian period; when the concept of sexuality was seen as vulgar, and sexual crime was glossed over as being merely violent crime. Never the less, this is one area in which Doyle seemed to stray from the popular ideology of the period, and cling to a more conservative one in the face of an explosion in interest in sexuality and sexual crime.

When Conan Doyle was writing Sherlock Holmes, it was during a period in which the woman was always the victim in violent crime, even if she had been the one who had committed the crime. Her actions were explained away by saying she had been driven to it by an evil man, or that she had merely been insane. Doyle's writing reflects this. The antagonists for Sherlock Holmes had to be clever and calculating, they had to be in complete possession of their faculties. This is why the main female antagonists for Holmes were not participants in violent crime: Irene Adler was a blackmailer and Miss Hatty Doran had run off to be with a man she loved, rather than marry Lord St. Simon.[31] This is also why the women who were victims of crimes in his writings were victims due to the greed of a criminal, and not from any other motivation.

Conan Doyle, and Sherlock Holmes were truly products of their time. They demonstrated the moral, and world, view of Victorian society with regard to women and crime. A woman as a violent criminal went against the world view of the Victorian Era and Conan Doyle. To make a woman a violent criminal, and one who was in complete control, and in full possession of her faculties, would have been seen as absurd. Doyle focused on the intellectual aspects of crime, which thus excluded women to a large extent, and his Victorian worldview only allowed for the limited selection of motives for the crimes that the Holmesian criminal would commit.

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[31]Doyle, "The Adventure of the Noble Bachelor" in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes: Volume 1*. ed. George Stade (New York, NY: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2003), 342- 358.