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“My Watson to Your Holmes”: Rewriting the Sidekick

Abstract

After years of treating Doctor John H. Watson as a faithful but not-that-clever friend and chronicler of Sherlock Holmes, recent revisions finally offer a character closer to Doyle’s version. Since each reworking of the great detective calls for a reworking of the diarist doctor, this paper aims to analyse contemporary Watson’s counterparts – literary: Carole Nelson Douglas’s Irene Adler has her Penelope Huxleigh, Neil Gaiman’s consulting detective his “S_ M_,” and cinematic: Gregory House has his James Wilson, and the *Whitechapel* DI Chandler has Edward Buchan. Each rewriting retains some features of the canonical sidekick through which the new character reflects on the original.

As a genre, detective story is one of the best organized forms of fiction and yet every now and then a writer comes up with his or her recipe for its structure. P. D. James’s often quoted set of rules consists of a central mysterious crime, a closed circle of suspects, a detective, and a solution (15) – a sidekick is not included. If, however, we agree with Stephen Knight that Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes became “a synonym for a detective” (qtd. in Hadley 62), then a sidekick is to be expected – already in the third text of the canon, “A Scandal in Bohemia” (1891), Holmes admits he is lost without his Boswell (Doyle vol.1, 12). P. D. James herself pronounced her list to be “unduly restrictive and more appropriate to the so-called Golden Age between the wars than it is today” (15) but even then a foil to the investigator was expected. Shortly after Doyle’s last collection of Sherlock Holmes stories was published, Ronald Knox provided a recipe for “the Watson”: “The stupid friend of the detective, the Watson, should be slightly, but no more than slightly, less intelligent than the average reader and his thoughts should not be concealed.” (James 52) All those indignant at referring to Holmes’s only friend as “stupid” seem to be on the same page as Doyle, who is reported as saying: “those who consider Watson to be a fool are simply admitting that they haven’t read the stories attentively” (qtd. in Toadvine 48).

Is the sidekick needed? In numerous narratives, the character is more than that – he is indispensable. The detective has been compared to the omniscient narrator who “elucidate[s] the connections between seemingly random characters and events to present a coherent and contained world” (Hadley 67), which makes his friend/assistant/chronicler, in other words the sidekick, not only the focaliser, but also the readers’ guide and informant, their eyes and ears. A. A. Milne answered the sidekick question the following way:

Are we to have a Watson? We are. Death to the author who keeps his unravelling for the last chapter, making all the other chapters but prologue to a five-minute drama. This is no way to write a story. Let us know from chapter to chapter what the detective is thinking. For this he must watsonize or soliloquize; the one is merely a dialogue form of the other, and by that, more readable. A Watson, then, not of necessity a fool of a Watson. A little slow, let him be, as so many of us are, but friendly, human, likeable. (James 148–149)

Such an interpreter/interviewer is particularly invaluable while dealing with a detective as brilliant as Sherlock Holmes, and the three adjectives – friendly, human, likeable – are especially accurate while characterising both the original Watson and his recent adaptations.

The term “adaptation” as employed here encompasses Linda Hutcheon’s transcoding, i.e. a change of medium, genre, frame, or context, and re-interpretation/re-creation (Chapter 1). It also recalls the palimpsestuous nature of the postmodern approach and Gérard Genette’s transtextuality (Brooker 113). The character’s story is presented through the telling mode (narrative literature) and the showing/performing mode (TV series). It seems that the new cinematic and literary male “Watsons” working with the new “Holmeses” excel at one particular characteristic of the original sidekick: the friend, the assistant, the chronicler; it takes the female counterpart to combine them all. Before turning to the rewritten characters, however, it is worth to turn to the source: Doyle’s doctor.

1. John H. Watson, M.D.

A rough biographical sketch of Watson is provided in the opening of the first Sherlock Holmes text, *A Study in Scarlet* (1887): a doctor with the University of London degree, trained in the Netley military hospital to be a surgeon, becomes a convalescent after the Maiwand battle,¹ which he might not have survived if it was not for his orderly. As a lonely veteran he “gravitate[s] to London” (Doyle vol.3, 14) only to gravitate to the consulting detective and, to cut a long (an generally well-known) story short, become his biographer and the only true friend. His role was summarised by Loren D. Estleman as “the ballast upon whose reassuring

weight Holmes came to rely more and more as the gaslight era drew to a close. That was the basis of the partnership from March 1881 to August 1914" (xii). But what kind of a partner and what kind of a man was he?

It seems clear that Watson, a promising young doctor with good prospects, was torn between medical advancement and adventure. Thus he took his first degree, and then travelled; he took his second, and then enlisted. Finally, after a longish period of convalescence, he settled for a combination of adventure with Holmes, and a series of fairly undemanding medical practices. (Radford 42)

At the same time, this lover of adventure is "solidly middle class," and among the middle-class traits April Toadvine lists his education and social ability, belief in progress and science, average intellect and heartiness, but also good fighting skills – a military legacy (51–52). Watson is also the voice of Victorian morality, a "code of behaviour that privileged work ethic, respectability, and modesty" (Toadvine 53). His courtship of Mary Morstan seems extremely modest, especially if we are to believe in his "experience of women which extends over many nations and three separate continents" (Doyle vol.3, 226). Womanising and respectability seem to stand in contradiction, nevertheless it was perfectly acceptable for Victorian men to have a certain level of familiarity with women, so long as it was not extra-marital – and even then a blind eye was often turned to it.

Setting aside the apparent facts and some intriguing inconsistencies in Doyle's portrayal of Watson (e.g. his shoulder/leg wound or his knowledge of Professor Moriarty), we may safely assume the following: (1) Watson is a patient man. Even though he describes Sherlock Holmes as "certainly not a difficult man to live with" (Doyle vol.3, 28), P. D. James points out that the detective "must have been an uncomfortable and sometimes dangerous companion for his friend and flat-mate" (38). Watson has to, at least initially, make room for the clients, deal with the mess, Holmes's addiction, gunshots fired at the wall, et cetera. (2) Watson is brave. The military past made him more stress-resistant, and whenever the detective predicts some trouble, he asks Watson to accompany him carrying gun – the very "bull pup" interpreted by some as a pet, and by others as "a short-barrelled pistol (similar to the model referred to as a 'bulldog')" (Klinger 26). (3) Watson is not a bore. He publishes interesting stories, makes a good conversation partner, gambles whenever can afford it, and gets up "at all sorts of ungodly hours" (Doyle vol.3, 25). (4) Watson is physically attractive. When the readers meet him, John is "as thin as a lath and as brown as a nut" (Doyle 17), although with time becomes "middle-sized, strongly built," and his neck gets "thick" (Doyle vol.2, 1029); still, he is popular with women and was married at least once.² And, last but not least: (5) Watson is much needed. Introduced not only as Holmes's companion but also his biographer, John is indispensable for the readers "who, try as they might to follow the clues, cannot solve the mystery and must wait for Sherlock Holmes to

explain” (Toadvine 53), relying on Watson to report the solution to them. The doctor’s narrative tone has been described as that of a “mildly self-satisfied bourgeois who feels he has a mastery of things” (Stephen Knight qtd. in Toadvine 52) but in his treatment of Holmes, Watson represents a hero-worship attitude (see e.g. Marinaro and Thomas), which was an inherent part of the Victorian world picture. And yet, despite being so much needed and also inseparable from Holmes, Watson “has suffered mightily at the hands of scholars and the public” (Estleman vii). The way the good doctor has been depicted in the now classic adaptations of the canon stands in stark contrast to contemporary screen reworkings of the character.

2. Adapting Watson

Almost twenty years ago, Loren D. Estleman hit the nail on the head, stating unequivocally: “Directors simply don’t know what to do with Watson.” (vii) This very brief but extremely apt statement corresponds with Adrian Conan Doyle’s, the writer’s son, description of what the viewers are usually offered: “the bumbling ass that is Hollywood’s conception” (qtd. in Toadvine 48). It is Nigel Bruce’s impressions that we are to blame, since his

corpulent and ineffectual bumbler (...) fixed Watson in the public mind for decades as a comic foil. If a mop bucket appeared in a scene, his foot would be inside it, and if by some sardonic twist of fate and the whim of director Roy William Neill he managed to stumble upon an important clue, he could be depended upon to blow his nose in it and throw it away. (Estleman vii)

If some readers were feeling superior to the narrator, the viewers must have been all the more so.

Estleman’s opinion from 1986 seems to omit the early episodes of the Granada television series (1984–1994), where David Burke’s (and later Edward Hardwicke’s) take on Watson was much more sympathetic to the original. But the landmark adaptation was in fact a pastiche: two years after Estleman expressed his opinion in print, the audiences were treated to a film that turned the tables: instead of a “slow-witted, almost buffoonish” Watson (Toadvine 48), “we are simply given a buffoon” version of Holmes (Barnes 300). *Without a Clue* (1988) depicts a Holmes (Michael Caine) who is merely an invention of a much more modest (?) Watson, an actor employed to deal with the clients and the press. It is the clever doctor (Ben Kingsley) who stands behind all the deductions and solved mysteries described in *The Strand* magazine, thus in a way the viewers are given a character that combines Joseph Bell, the inspiration behind the great detective, and Conan Doyle himself – after all, he is the real mastermind behind all the cases.

Since “audiences are more demanding of fidelity when dealing with classics” (Hutcheon 29), and Doyle’s canon does belong to the category, recent screen versions of the adventures of the 221B tenants resulted in both positive and sceptical reactions. *Sherlock Holmes* (2009) and *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011), BBC *Sherlock* (2010–) and CBS *Elementary* (2012–) clearly belong to a new Watsonian era. Disregarding the ‘bromance’ way of marketing his two films, Guy Ritchie “wanted a more equal couple” (qtd. in Thomas 36) and placed Doyle’s characters in his “highly masculine-oriented milieu” (Thomas 37). This Holmes is exceedingly dependable on Watson (Jude Law) and has trouble accepting him moving out – as do his BBC and CBS counterparts. Critics of the first female Watson (Lucy Liu) must be disappointed that instead of “typical CBS police procedural characters who would inevitably, after a suitable amount of sexual tension, become a romantic couple” (Porter, “The Process...” 126) the viewers are offered two independent investigators. And despite the homosexual undertones detectable in the BBC series, John gets his (appropriately appropriated) Mary. Even though in all these adaptations Holmes’s deductive skills remain unparalleled, in terms of character development we are finally given a doctor on a par with the detective. What happens when the two are transcoded and transtextualised?

3. Implanting Watson

Arthur Conan Doyle is quoted as replying William Gillette: “marry him, murder him, do anything you like” (Kuhn 53). Agreeing to the rewriting of Holmes, by extension he agreed to the rewriting of Watson, and accepted the possibility of his characters being remodelled and transplanted to completely new environments. This section of the paper will present four instances of Watson-like sidekicks (James Wilson: the loyal friend, Edward Buchan: the (amateur) assistant, Sebastian Moran: the chronicler, Penelope Huxleigh: the sidekick proper) on the basis of four titles inspired by Conan Doyle’s canon. Two are cinematic: *House, M.D.* – a medical drama, and the first season of *Whitechapel* – a crime series; two are literary: “A Study in Emerald” – a Holmesian-Lovecraftian pastiche, and the Irene Adler series of novels – a feminist revision. Each Watsonian counterpart shares some features of the original that both define the character and reflect the milieu of the given version.

James Wilson shares with John Watson more than just initials and being a doctor. His circumstances change considerably due to the acquaintance with Gregory House – the Holmes figure, and for some time the two share a flat. Apparently, Wilson is an attractive man (tall, slim, dashing even) popular with women, and the number of his marriages is debatable. The biggest differences between the two characters are that Wilson is neither the narrator nor the focaliser of the stories presented, and he rarely takes an active part in solving House’s

puzzles. His Watsonian trace is most apparent in his friendship with the extravagant diagnostician.

People do not understand House – Wilson is the only person who does. If Holmes was not the most social character, House is the most asocial one. His impertinence, arrogance, and disrespect for both patients and colleagues are legendary; paradoxically, his apparent lack of compassion, distrust and fishing for lies make him an effective, and equally legendary, diagnostician. David Shore, the creator of the series, said they made Wilson “House’s everyman, leaning over his shoulder and going, ‘How’d you do that?’ And more important, ‘Why’d you do that?’” (qtd. in O’Hare). However, unlike Watson, who was asking Holmes in the readers’ stead, Wilson is not supposed to help the viewers learn more about the case – House has a whole diagnostic team whose role is also that. The answers to Wilson’s questions provide information about House himself, and help the viewing public understand the antisocial expert. Conan Doyle’s Watson was “the moral authority at 221B” (Toadvine 54), and Wilson acts as the conscience of Gregory House, as well as his social interface. Hugh Laurie (House) says that the very Robert Sean Leonard (Wilson) carries “a Watsonian solid citizen aura about him” (*House: Swan Song*).

Similarly to the canonical army surgeon and then physician, Wilson is a practicing doctor, but being the Head of Oncology at a major teaching hospital, is more successful than his literary model. Whenever the case/puzzle House is solving is connected with cancer, he points his team directly to Wilson, which speaks of the reclusive genius’ respect for his friend’s talents. The sidekick job description demands of Wilson spending more screen time with Greg than with his own patients but it seems that his very professional skills help him deal with House as well. Attending to terminally ill patients who are at various stages of their disease – and thus at various stages of reacting to their condition (denial, anger, fear, hope, acceptance) – demands of the doctor great patience, tolerance, empathy, sympathy, and understanding. All of the above are extremely relevant to dealing with House on regular basis.

Although being loyal to House usually comes at a price, Wilson is almost unflinchingly ready to pay it. Countless times he is played or used, and still he is willing to tolerate House’s pranks – all in the name of “this stupid, screwed up friendship” (“The House-Wilson Friendship in Quotes”). He is, however, capable of drawing a line – just like Watson with his objections to narcotics, which make him a man ahead of his time (Estleman xv) – and does not want to accept his friend’s drug addiction. Wilson is willing to fight for his friend’s health and safety. When it is Wilson’s life that is in danger, House refers to his ways to keep his friend happy. Despite fairly frequent attempts at going behind each other’s backs, both know the other like the back of their hand, are honest, and respect each other. The antisocial genius and the social ‘good doctor’ form a friendship that is complicated but true.

Edward Buchan, a ripperologist, may sound nothing like the Watson figure: he is middle-aged, overweight, and lives with his mother. Having spent twenty years examining the 1888 series of murders, the suspects and theories, he “knows everything about the murder” that is committed in a copycat manner in the twenty-first century Whitechapel (Episode 2). Similarly to Wilson, he is neither the narrator nor the focaliser of the series, but he does relate a story – the historic serial killings. His Watsonian trace is apparent in his engagement and active part taken in the investigation.

From the moment he enters the scene, Buchan wants to be useful: an amateur in the world of the police, he is an expert on the past crime and is willing to make a contribution. Even though Buchan’s motifs are of a personal nature (his obsession with the mystery of Jack the Ripper), from “a nuisance, [he] becomes the police asset” (Krawczyk-Żywko 119), and is especially important to Detective Inspector Chandler. The DI is a novice at murder cases, therefore the help so eagerly offered to him is appreciated. Moreover, Buchan admits that in his heart he is a detective (Episode 1), and convinces Chandler he is “the very soul of discretion: My Watson to your Holmes.” (Episode 2) When the ripperologist realises his knowledge was used by the copycat, he is capable of swallowing up his own pride and ready to compromise his life work – the book about the Ripper – for the greater good: to help the police catch the killer.

Similarly to Wilson, Buchan helps us understand the main character. The DI is not only new to murder investigations, he is new to the station as well, and, being an outsider, is not easily accepted there. What is more, his obsessive-compulsive neurosis, treating others with marked superiority, and being a lone wolf make him difficult to accept by the viewers. The fictional detective “needs a domestic setting if the reader [or viewer] is to enter fully into his life” (James 117) and, by extension, accept him, or even like him. It is Buchan’s informal pub conversations with Chandler that not only further the investigation and provide an insight into the latter’s real character but, more importantly, open the detective up, making way for both his colleagues’ and the viewers’ sympathy.

The ripperologist’s major sidekick assignment, however, remains that of an assistant. Even though the series is rather serious in tone, there are moments when Buchan is reminiscent of Nigel Bruce’s Watson: eager but clumsy, he looks up to the detective and wants to impress him; he is doing his best and yet ends up in a cell suspected of complicity with the copycat. His knowledge and ability to connect facts, however, finally win him if not respect, then at least some approval at the police station, since he is offered a permanent consulting post and an office of sorts – the Whitechapel crime archives, where clues to the solutions of other past crimes are buried. The amateur detective and crime history expert becomes an enthusiastic and increasingly valuable assistant.

As the initials suggest, the retired Major S_M_ who narrates “A Study in Emerald” is none other than Professor Moriarty’s “cunning, cunning henchman”

(Estleman xiii) – Sebastian Moran. His similarity to the original Watson is evident in certain biographical details, such as the Afghan military experience or moving in with the consulting detective to Baker Street, but the most apparent Watsonian trace is the very act of retelling the story, including the progress of the investigation.

Instead of revealing himself, Gaiman's narrator hides behind the facade of details mirroring those presented in *A Study in Scarlet* and other facts known to every fan of Conan Doyle's texts. Added to it are Lovecraftian elements – the Great Old Ones and their rule of terror – and thus the overall image of Doyle's world is distorted and the reader becomes a detective decoding the references. Once Gaiman's concept is clear, the references that are veiled with typically Watsonian overtones, and because of that initially easily overlooked, begin to stand out, and it becomes clear the narrator has to be Moran – “not a literary man” but “a crack shot” (Gaiman 1). He enjoys simple pleasures, like the propaganda performance about the Old Ones, is fairly shy and deeply impressed with the detective's skills and intelligence. The detective, on the other hand, not only makes the ex-soldier feel needed and of some value, but also trusts him completely and wants to have him by his side. Moran is Moriarty's “loyal cooperater, more naive in his outlook and his opinions on the Old Ones and their rule” (Klęczar 161), nevertheless we are obliged to rely on his statement of the case.

Generally, “the first-person narrative has the advantage of immediacy and of reader identification and sympathy with the one whose voice he hears. It can also be an aid to credibility, since the reader is more likely to suspend disbelief in the more improbable twists in the plot when hearing the explanation from the person most concerned” (James 120), yet how are we to identify with the narrator who has deceived us into believing that he was Watson? But has he really deceived us? The chronicler has not been lying, it is the readers' knowledge of Doyle's characters that is played with. Moran has been merely recording the story he was involuntarily involved in as faithfully as he is capable of doing. As a narrator he is not completely reliable, since he himself has doubts concerning his senses: “I hoped that I was not imagining it” (Gaiman 5). His nerves are “in shreds and tatters” (1), his wounded hand shakes, war memories keep haunting him in nightmares, and his new (and only) friend is “a mystery” to him (2). At one point the narrator even admits he is not a sensible man – if he were, he “would burn all these pages” (9). Instead, he decides to place them in his bank to be opened when all those involved are dead. As a story-teller, despite (or maybe due to) his uncertain mental state, he does a fairly good job and the readers' impression that they have been deceived is the result of their stepping into Moran's shoes – who in the role of the diarist is on their side – by deciding that they are more clever than the sidekick and leaping to conclusions instead of patiently waiting for the solution to be reported.

This retelling is also interesting because of the presence of John Watson in the story, whose role as Holmes's sidekick is slightly altered: instead of assist-

ing in solving crimes, he helps commit them. And yet, everything seems to be fine since this "murderous accomplice, tentatively identified as a former military surgeon" (Gaiman 9), "Watson-as-soldier, who also has the medical knowledge to become an efficient executioner, is nonetheless a 'war-hero' fighting on behalf of humanity" (Porter, "Bookends..." 196), as always at Holmes's side. Appearances can be deceptive, as demonstrated by the reading of the narrator of the story. Gaiman's characters retain the roles ascribed to them by Conan Doyle: Holmes and Watson, fighting against the Lovecraftian Old Ones, are the heroes, Moriarty and Moran, supporting the *status quo* and serving the monstrous Queen are the villains, and the detective's flatmate is also his diarist who makes the story available to the readers.

Question: "Who is Dr. John H. Watson?" Answer: "Sherlock Holmes's Nell." (Douglas, *Castle Rouge* 103) If Irene Adler is the diva-detective, does not a two-year older spinster- and sister-like figure make a great sidekick? Nell "is the very model of traditional Victorian womanhood" (Douglas, "Interview" 469) but with a Neo-Victorian twist and an interesting personal transformation continuing throughout the series. What is more, she is the sidekick in every sense of the word, and out of the four discussed here, this feminist revision of the detective's companion seems to be the closest to the original Watson.

Penelope Huxleigh is an orphan of a widowed parson raised in Shropshire. Having neither kith nor kin, she has worked as a governess and a shop assistant, but also as a typist, thus doing all the jobs available to a young Victorian woman. As a girl, Nell read too many ghost stories, and as a woman, she devoured the Ripper articles. Vanity is alien to her, yet she shares the British feeling of superiority, and despite being overly proper, does not like her role to be diminished. Although she does not want to admit it even to herself, Nell has a sweetheart, Quentin. She crosses paths with Irene when the latter rescues her few belongings from an urchin, and the women become not only friends, but also flatmates and "sister sleuth[s]" (Douglas, *Chapel Noir* 245). When Irene gets married and moves in with Godfrey Norton, Miss Huxleigh is asked to move in with them.

Watson and Nell share not only parallel relationships, but also represent similar middle-class values and sidekick skills. When Irene suspects a field trip may be dangerous, she asks Nell to come with her; when she is working on a case, she uses Nell as "a wall off which [her] speculations can ricochet, even if it is a crooked wall" (*Castle Rouge* 155). Even though Nell is not as clever as Irene and the two are completely different in terms of personalities and world-views, they complement each other and their partnership is based on mutual respect. Nell's note-taking abilities are indispensable for working out clues and suspects; moreover, the notes become the source of information for the readers. The records of the adventures are written and published as a diary, whose pages are presented in the editor's notes as "examples of a rediscovered and re-valued women's history"

(Vanacker 101) by one “Fiona Witherspoon, Ph.D., F.I.A. (Advocates of Irene Adler).” What is more, they are examples of a clever and good-humoured play with Conan Doyle’s canon.

Readers of Doyle know Irene Adler from “A Scandal in Bohemia,” a story which became the reason for Nell’s dislike of the doctor. She records the ‘real’ version of the events in the first instalment of her diaries published as *Good Night, Mr. Holmes* (1990), and thus Douglas’s series begins. One of its most interesting aspects is the juxtaposition of the two pairs: Irene and Nell on the one hand, Holmes and Watson on the other. Although Nell is compared to John, her own view of Holmes’s sidekick is very negative, and so is her view of the great detective: “In this feminist alternative universe, indeed, Holmes is frequently the antagonist, feared and disliked by the prim and partial Nell, a competitor from whom clues have to be hidden and solutions snatched.” (Vanacker 99) However, in defence of Nell’s perception of Holmes, it has to be stressed that she does not deny his effectiveness, maybe even talents, and is not the only character distrustful of his peculiar behaviour. After all, he belongs to the “superhuman sleuths” and she is on the part of “their all-too-human compatriots” (Estleman xvii-xviii).

4. The sidekick rewritten

The texts discussed here present a sidekick who is a rewriting of John Watson and may easily be divided into two groups. To the first belong two TV series about contemporary people that incorporate certain Holmesian and Watsonian references. Viewers not familiar with Doyle’s stories enjoy them as works of popular genres – a medical drama and a crime series – with well-developed characters. Those who do recognise the references read between the lines and enjoy them as appropriations of the canon. Both titles stress the individuality and distinction of the detective and a need for the sidekick who would function not as a reporter to the viewer but rather as a social interface to the detective. On the one hand, the preoccupation with his job – a diagnostician and a policeman respectively – combined with some personal issues make the detective figure an effective professional; on the other, his poor social skills make him vulnerable not only to other characters but also to the viewers, and therefore in need of a “friendly, human, likeable” Watson (A. A. Milne qtd. in James 149).

The other group consists of literary reworkings of Doyle’s canon in the form of a pastiche – “A Study in Emerald,” and a Neo-Victorian series of novels about Irene Adler. Closer to the traditional depiction of the sidekick if only for the very medium – fiction, a written text – they offer a narrator who is informative as far as the investigation is concerned and reveals a lot about the detective and him- or herself. While it is their thoughts we have access to, it is the authors’ voice

we hear, and it is the subversive yet playful undertone that makes us appreciate these (re-)creations even more. The matadaptive and hypertextual reworking by Gaiman encourages readers to reconsider the false image of John Watson as the passive and not that clever talker, which was popularised by the early film adaptations and, hopefully, is becoming obsolete. The hypertextual revision by Douglas offers on the one hand a negative image of Watson-the-Holmes-worshipper, which also may stem from the "classic" cinematic versions, and his feminist (re-)interpretation on the other.

In each male sidekick revision there is usually one aspect of the original Watson they excel at which dominates the narrative: the friend in *House, M.D.*, the assistant in *Whitechapel*, or the chronicler in "A Study in Emerald." It is interesting that the revision which incorporates the largest share of Watsonian traces is the one that is trying "to 'correct' certain aspects of the Holmes myth" (Vanacker 97) by rewriting the history of nineteenth-century women, and, it goes without saying, men, too. Whereas Joan Watson of *Elementary* was heavily criticised even before the first episode was broadcast, the female counterpart of the doctor accompanying the female counterpart of the detective seems to be on the safe side. Is it because she poses no heterosexual romantic threat and instead of offering a female version of the bromance or winking at homosexuality (an approach which seems to be popular with contemporary audiences – see Guy Ritchie's films or the BBC *Sherlock*) obeys the classical Watson rules? Penelope Huxleigh lets Irene Adler 'watsonize' (or 'nellize'), which allows the readers follow the investigation; she is not silly and, what is more, she is witty; she is also a little slow, but not when assisting the inquiry – rather when analysing her own personal life, which only adds to her humanity and likeability.

Lynette Porter points out that "Sherlock Holmes and John Watson will never grow old in our imagination or their ability to entertain us. No matter in which time period, or even universe; no matter if they are portrayed as young, middle-aged, or old men; Holmes needs Watson, and readers/audiences the world over need Sherlock Holmes." (201) Moreover, Sherlock Holmes "became the standard against which all subsequent fictional detectives were measured, and usually found wanting" (Hadley 64), and, by extension, John H. Watson became the standard against which the sidekicks may be measured. Although initially heavily undervalued and even portrayed as a character providing idle comic relief, his importance for both the detective and the readers is on the rise – Watson has recently been upgraded and his fans have been offered a few interesting revisions. This essay begun with P. D. James's rules for, or the expectations of, detective fiction which omitted the sidekick, but the writer was not hostile towards the figure – on the contrary, she appreciated the role they play. Let me finish by quoting her wish about contemporary Watsons: "long may they flourish" (James 149), be they male or female.

Notes

1. Patrick Mercer, the author of e.g. *Doctor Watson's War* (2012), believes that Conan Doyle based the character on the Surgeon-Major Alexander Francis Preston (see Venning).
2. The difficulty with proper calculation was described by Kuhn as “the problem of Watson’s ‘wives’” (54) and is discussed e.g. by Cynkin (25–26).

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