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Whodunit to Irene Adler? From “the Woman” to “the Dominatrix” – on the Transformation of the Heroine in the Adapting Process and Her Representation in the Sherlock Miniseries

One of the peculiar characteristics of the Sherlock Holmes fandom is that it has always had a tendency to blow innuendos in Arthur Conan Doyle’s stories out of proportion. One might argue that such is the case of Irene Adler, the most recognisable female character from the Sherlock Holmes canon. Although we are not given much information on her in the original story and she hardly speaks in her own voice, for the community of readers she has become the most significant woman that Sherlock Holmes had ever encountered. Thus, the creators who adapted her for the screen also treated the heroine of “A Scandal in Bohemia” symbolically, allowing themselves to freely portray her presence in their versions of the story. For certain reasons, Irene Adler has been interpreted in pop-culture differently at various times: as the woman who beat Holmes with her wit, the detective’s romantic interest, his nemesis or a femme fatale figure. This tendency seems to be pushed to the extreme recently and the adaptations of the heroine in question gravitate towards a sexually confident, overtly self-aware, as well as dominant (both sexually and mentally) rival to Holmes.

The idea behind this paper is to investigate the transformation of Irene Adler’s character from the originally debatably scandalous adventuress to her modern portrayal as a dominatrix in the BBC miniseries, *Sherlock*. Hence, I will concentrate on this most recent take on the woman in the episode “A Scandal in Belgravia,” attempting to analyse in what ways the creators of the show go back to the roots and succeed in capturing the essence of Irene Adler’s figure, and conversely – in what measure does this adaptation epitomize the changes done to the character over the years of reinterpreting and diverting from its literary counterpart.

key words: Irene Adler, Sherlock Holmes, adaptation, appropriation, reinterpretation, transmedia fandom, fan fiction

When we think of Sherlock Holmes, the most famous of Arthur Conan Doyle’s literary inventions, the first thing which springs to our minds is, most probably, his astounding, invincible wit. This is, however, not an entirely accurate picture, for Holmes was outmaneuvered a number of times, and once by a woman. In fact, she should be called “the woman,” as this is the honourable title with which Holmes endowed Irene Adler (Doyle 161), the most notable heroine from the Sherlock Holmes Canon. Even though she was initially a mere object of his investigation, she managed to win the detective’s respect with her intelligence and personality. In “A Scandal in Bohemia” (1891) she is revealed to be a former mistress of a Bohemian king, who feels threatened by her since she still has the photograph of the two, and might use it for blackmail. The “consulting detective” spectacularly fails to recover the compromising photograph, and, at the same time, realizes he was on the wrong side all along, as the woman kept the photograph merely for the purpose of protecting herself against the monarch. Holmes, who in

the previous stories appears to be indifferent as far as the fair sex is concerned, requests a different photograph of Adler (which the woman left behind) in lieu of payment from the king of Bohemia, and he keeps it as a keepsake.

This brief appearance of Irene Adler in the canon – for she featured only in one story – was enough to make her the single female character the readers now immediately associate with Sherlock Holmes. Along with the popularity of the character, various peculiar interpretations started to spring. Soon, the avid readers of Doyle linked the sleuth and the woman romantically, apparently ignoring the fact that the canonical Irene Adler had a husband with whom she escaped from England to live happily undisturbed in America. As it turned out, this was just the tip of the iceberg of the numerous changes that the heroine was subjected to in later adaptations, reinventions, and derivative fan work.

For quite a long time Holmesian criticism had been preoccupied with trifles regarding the heroine's character. Questions were asked and answered as to, for instance, who was the "real" Irene Adler, the woman behind the fictional heroine – names ranging from Sarah Bernhardt to Helena Modrzejewska were proposed (both established in the belle époque as serious dramatic actresses, of French and Polish origin respectively) (Redmond 41; Polatynska and Polatynska). Nonetheless, what has been gradually coming into focus is the feminist approach to interpreting the role of "the woman" in the Sherlock Holmes Canon, as well as her representations in the adaptations of "A Scandal in Bohemia" and appropriations of Sherlock Holmes's adventures – the analyses often going side by side with and influenced by the growing interest of the feminist theory in Victorian and neo-Victorian texts (see, for example, "Sherlock's Progress through History: Feminist Revisions of Holmes" by Sabine Vanacker in *Sherlock Holmes and Conan Doyle: Multi-Media Afterlives*).

One of the recent takes on "the woman" is an episode of the BBC miniseries *Sherlock*, in which the heroine is portrayed by Lara Pulver. In a way, it epitomizes the transformation of Irene Adler over the years of retelling, and the interpretative problems that arise from these modifications. The structural premise of the whole series is a mix and match approach to the canon. When the creators of the show take ideas from Doyle, they do not simply adapt individual stories, but combine motifs and plot points from different works. They usually twist them or reverse them in a counter-intuitive way – that is, different from what the viewer familiar with the canon might expect. Moreover, *Sherlock*, being a modernization of the stories, moves their action to the 21st century and gets rid of the anachronisms, such as the character of the king of Bohemia or the very kingdom of Bohemia; hence, the title of the episode featuring Irene Adler was rewritten to "A Scandal in Belgravia" (2012). The episode is, therefore, conspicuously set in the fashionable parts of London (as is most of the series), which neatly corresponds with the context of the original story – one mentioning a distant and somewhat mysterious kingdom, and involving higher circles (namely, the Bohemian monarch). Taking all these changes into consideration, the *Sherlock* series has to be analyzed as more of an appropriation than an adaptation. However interesting the ways in which the plot of "A Scandal in Belgravia" deviates from Doyle's original are, this article will be more concerned with scrutinizing the character and the representation of Irene Adler as she appears in the episode, rather than examining different techniques in which the creators of the television series adapted the story itself.

As mentioned earlier, if Irene Adler were to appear in an adaptation, it would be very likely to include some sort of a romantic motif involving Sherlock Holmes and the heroine. This has been most probably intended to indulge the target audience: "most readers, it seems, have preferred to see her as the woman Sherlock Holmes loved and lost (or, in a minority view, loved and later won)" (Redmond 41). The creators of the *Sherlock* television drama seemingly resist

this tendency, even up to the point of reversing it. In the original story Adler and Holmes showed mutual respect for each other, while in the series the attitude of the woman towards the detective, and vice versa, is cold and calculated almost until the end of the episode. It would be inaccurate to say that they do not appreciate each other's intellects, but, indeed, Irene uses Sherlock instrumentally to get the information she needs, whereas Sherlock ridicules Irene in the climactic scene for being too emotional and overplaying her flirtatious act: "Oh, enjoying the thrill of the chase is fine, craving the distraction of the game – I sympathize entirely – but sentiment? Sentiment is a chemical defect found in the losing side." In the original story, Holmes did not mock the emotionality of Adler, which shows particularly in his respect for the woman's decision to elope with her husband to America. In "A Scandal in Belgravia," however, emotionality is for Sherlock not a thing of admiration but scorn, and, in his view, a weakness which allows him to see through Adler, and defeat her. His emotional detachment may be softened by the fact that he appears to be emotional, too, when he rescues Irene in the last scene. On the other hand (and this is not even as complicated as it gets), this is incidentally the same scene for which the writer of the episode, Steven Moffat, has been widely criticized,¹ due to its alleged sexism and not staying true to the character. After all, the canonical Irene Adler escapes from the king of Bohemia unaided, thus rescuing herself. In the episode, instead, she has to be rescued by Sherlock, or else she would die. The memorable quote from the story, "Good-night, Mister Sherlock Holmes" (Doyle 173), was uttered by Adler when she successfully got away and did not need nor wanted Holmes (or anyone) to follow her. In comparison, Irene from "A Scandal in Belgravia" texts: "Goodbye Mr Holmes" when she is about to be beheaded, as she has found herself captured by a terrorist cell in Karachi. She does not know yet that the man standing behind her is not the executioner but Sherlock in disguise, waiting for the right moment to save Irene from the terrorists. The notion of Irene's inability to survive without help from men was met with the disapproval of many critics and viewers², but – leaving aside this vexing problem for the time being – what should now be stressed is that the whole situation is, inarguably, a sign of sentiment on Sherlock's part, in spite of his declaration of being emotionally reserved. After all, there is no other conceivable reason why he would need to rescue Irene for his own purposes.

There are many other instances in the episode when Sherlock could be perceived as somewhat sentimental about Irene. Most significantly, he keeps her phone as a keepsake, just as the canonical Holmes did with the photograph. Thus, although throughout the episode we are led to believe that Sherlock and Irene are pitted against each other, and that their relationship is founded on the question of who will outsmart who, there is a great deal of tenderness between the characters, although not necessarily of the romantic kind.

The innuendos from "A Scandal in Bohemia," the original story, not only gave life to the speculations about romantic possibilities between Holmes and Adler, but also whipped up interest as to the sexuality of the woman. She is described by the king of Bohemia as "a well-known adventuress" (Doyle 165), which can either mean that she was a foreigner, travelled all over the world and was courted by men of upper class, or it may simply suggest she was a courtesan (Redmond 41). Either way, over the years she became much more sexualized than she appeared

¹ The debate was heated up in the mainstream media by *The Guardian* journalist, Jane Clare Jones, who has published her piece online two days after the episode was broadcast for the first time, concluding that it was "politically, really quite regressive" and stating: "you've got to worry when a woman comes off worse in 2012 than in 1891" ("Is Sherlock Sexist?").

² For instance, consider how in "Steven Moffat, Sherlock, and Neo-Victorian Sexism" by Holger Syme Irene's role is summed up as an "angel at the hearth redux."

in the story to begin with.³ In the BBC *Sherlock* series this feature of Adler is pushed to the extreme – she is presented as “the dominatrix.” Be that as it may, the heroine is not a prostitute, just as she was not in the story. Much like her literary counterpart, her reputation may be disputable but she stays right on the edge of respectability, never appearing as a fallen woman. She is also presented as someone who takes advantage of her ambiguous position in the society. Irene uses her sexuality not only as her livelihood, but also as a weapon. She knows people’s desires and vulnerabilities, and learns how to play them; “I make my way in the world. I misbehave,” she says.

Much as sheer sexuality would not be a successful weapon against Sherlock, who is not baffled by anything that would turn other men’s ears red, Irene still knows how to play her sex against someone who seems to be immune to embarrassment. When Sherlock poses as a beaten up clergyman to get into Irene’s home, she surprises him by entering the room completely stripped. While Sherlock’s costume in the episode is a direct reference to the story, in which Holmes indeed dressed up as a vicar, the nakedness of Irene – to which she refers as her “battle dress” – might be seen as an exploitation of the original. In the canon, admittedly, Adler also dresses up, at the end of the story, however not in the nude but in a man’s costume. It would be an easy way out to explain why Steven Moffat put Irene in such a controversial position by pointing to the fact that *Sherlock* is a modern adaptation and that it has already become all-too-popular to sexualize Adler excessively. But if one would, instead, focus on the context in which Moffat places the character, they would find an entirely different answer to the question. The writer of the episode makes Irene a dominatrix, a sex worker who uses her sexuality for power play. In Doyle, Adler put on a male costume for the freedom and advantage it gave her over men (Krumm 194-95), and this was as subversive as it could get. In a modern version, cross-dressing would not be subversive at all, not to mention that it would not fool anyone. Instead, the use of her female sexuality in such a crude way as in the show allowed Irene to get the upper hand over the confused Sherlock. While a woman’s naked body is usually associated with being an object of the male gaze, here the nakedness of Irene is a weapon against the detective. The male gaze works against Sherlock. However, that is not to say that his mind gets sidetracked by the presence of a naked female body because it is an object of arousal. Rather, it should be underlined that since Irene Adler had almost nothing⁴ about her person, the detective had no information to deduce from, or to put it more precisely – he had difficulties in concentrating on an “object” he did not expect to be met with. Thus, Irene beat him at his own game. Sherlock from the series is unable to decode the woman’s naked body,⁵ just as Holmes from the books did not recognize the woman in the male costume.

³ For further reference, see: “Taming the Woman: Irene Adler and the Male Gaze,” paying special attention to what the author wrote about Rachel McAdams’ portrayal of the woman in Guy Ritchie’s *Sherlock Holmes* (2009) as “a hyper-sexualized character.” Although the tendency towards presenting Adler in recent adaptations as being in charge of her sexuality is also discussed, her character is judged as still merely “function[ing] as an element of spectacle” and her sexual awareness evaluated as “play[ing] straight into male fantasy.”

⁴ Apart from her earrings, make-up, and shoes. Interestingly, when we take a look at the deductions Sherlock makes about other people (as in, for instance, about John Watson, his flatmate and companion, *in the very same scene*), it seems quite obvious that he is able to derive information merely on the basis of skin condition or the state of somebody’s fingernails. This comparison would suggest that the nakedness *per se* actually played an important part in taking Sherlock aback. Then again, it might just as well be an inconsistency in the script, allowed for the sake of making the plot point work.

⁵ Sherlock eventually overcomes his confusion and successfully deduces relevant information from Irene’s appearance, although not before the woman gives him a decisive clue: “I’d tell you the code right now but you know what? I already have. Think.”

The nakedness of Irene underlines yet another motif inspired by the canon – namely, that of Adler being Holmes’s counterpart. In relation to sexuality, this works as a binary opposition: the heroine sneeringly refers to Sherlock as “the Virgin,” whereas for her, sexuality serves as a means of empowerment. Besides, she shares sexual ambiguity with him. We know that Sherlock claims to be married to his work but, other than that, we know nothing about the reasons why he is indifferent to the sexual sphere of life (he never stated to be asexual, which would have explained a lot). Irene, on the other hand, claims to be homosexual, although the previous scenes reveal that she had an affair with a man. Whether it was just a part of her work or she is, in fact, bisexual, is not clarified. Nonetheless, regardless of its validity, the statement on her sexual orientation itself seems to be a concept that, yet again, reflects the canon in a distorted mirror; in the story Adler is unavailable to other men because she becomes a married woman, whereas in the modern adaptation labelling herself “gay” makes her unreachable.

The idea of Irene and Sherlock being each other’s counterparts is also visible in their being portrayed as intellectual equals. Doyle described Adler as having “the face of the most beautiful of women, and the mind of the most resolute of men” (Doyle 166) and made her the only woman ever to beat Holmes. Likewise, in the television series Irene is clever enough to predict that with a man such as Sherlock her allure would not be of much use, and that she has to play his *hubris* against him, instead. However, this turns out to be a double-edged sword, and the power play between Irene and Sherlock in the show turns the other way round than in the canon: in Doyle, Holmes is outwitted by Adler, largely due to the fact that he did not expect a woman to be smart enough to do so; in Moffat’s appropriation, on the other hand, Sherlock defeats Irene who overplayed the game and gave herself away.

The combination of beauty and intellect contributed to the tendency to picture Irene Adler in derivative works as Holmes’s nemesis or, subsequently, as a *femme fatale*. The latter one was especially cherished by those who were looking for a romance between the two characters and preferred to ascribe the lack of it in the canon to the motif of Holmes’s unfulfilled love. In fact, the heroine from the original story might already be seen an example of such a literary archetype; as Pascale Krumm notes, Adler “quite literally epitomized the nineteenth-century myth of the *femme fatale*” (194). Such a presentation of Adler as “the fatal woman” became a growing trend in cinematic depictions. In the 1946 *Dressed to Kill* (also known under the working title, *Prelude to Murder*), starring Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce, the ruthless woman, Mrs Courtney (played by Patricia Morison), the brains behind a criminal gang, may be interpreted as an Adler-like character, since the film makes several references to “A Scandal in Bohemia,” most prominently in Mrs Courtney using a bogus fire to reveal the whereabouts of a hidden item – a neat reversal of events from Doyle’s story, in which it was Holmes who used the same ploy on Adler (although the heroine in her own right is mentioned in the dialogue between Holmes and Watson, as a tongue-in-cheek intertextual reference). More recently, the heroine was portrayed by Rachel McAdams in *Sherlock Holmes* (2009) and later sequel, *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011), as a sexually and socially liberated *femme fatale*, a temptress, a “world-class thief” and a scandalous trouble-maker, employed and manipulated by the detective’s greatest adversary in order to destroy the famous Sherlock Holmes, with whom the woman is infatuated. Irene Adler is also presented as an even more mysterious and menacing antagonist of Sherlock Holmes in the CBS television series, *Elementary* (2013).

As the examples provided above suggest, Irene Adler depicted as a *femme fatale* also paved the way for the demonization of the character, making her a rival to Holmes, or even bestowing her with villainous qualities. In the BBC *Sherlock* series Steven Moffat took advantage of these associations, already well-rooted in the collective imagination, and he also went one step

further by linking the character of Irene with the detective's arch-villain, Moriarty.⁶ He might have as well related her to the devil himself because there is no better personification of pure evil in the canon. The relationship between Irene and Moriarty ultimately benefits both: the woman is given the advice on "how to play the Holmes boys" (meaning Sherlock and his brother, Mycroft), for which she provides Moriarty with the information she manipulatively gets out of Sherlock. Associating Irene with the antihero and thus making her a villain by extension is, perhaps, the best example of how much this character has been changed over time in comparison with the original story. After all, in Doyle, the men who pursued the woman, the king and Holmes himself, turn out to be "the villains" since they were wrong about Irene Adler's true intentions.

Considering all the changes made to the character, conveniently expressed in various ways in the BBC *Sherlock* miniseries, the question arises whether Irene has really become as strong and dominant a character as she appears to be. On the one hand, the modern Irene Adler escapes the unjust categorisation of "woman as either a harlot or a housewife" (Krumm 194). In Doyle's story she might be seen as both, since Adler, a former actress and opera singer (professions back then already implying an ill repute), leaves her past "of dubious and questionable memory" (Doyle 161) behind in want of escaping with her newly-wed husband. In comparison, in the modern version Irene's reputation is also questionable but not, as we might expect, due to her profession (which makes her rather more ambiguous than unrespectable), but because of her scheming and plotting, let alone the connection with the "consulting criminal," Moriarty. Still, even if Irene is no longer defined on the basis of her relationship with men, she fails to be truly her own person, since she is not independent from the criminal mastermind, after all – a man. She turns out to be even more dependent on men in the last scene, when Sherlock saves her from execution. She has previously been outsmarted by Sherlock, contrary to the original story, in which Holmes was defeated by the woman. In the episode, however, her position is, eventually, the one of a typical "damsel in distress." Therefore, modern Irene may have escaped one pair of Victorian labels but she fell back into a yet more outdated feminine role – a step backwards even from Doyle's original.⁷ The argument that could somehow balance out this disparity of power between the man and the woman was put forward by the author of the episode himself in an interview for *The Guardian*:

Everyone else gets it that Irene wins. When Sherlock turns up to save her at the end it's like Eliza Dolittle [sic!] coming back to Henry Higgins in *My Fair Lady*: 'OK, I like you, now let me hack up these terrorists with a big sword.'

⁶ As a matter of fact, Steven Moffat was not the first to come up with the idea of linking Irene Adler with Moriarty, but the collaboration between the two in other adaptations was often associated with Adler's unawareness of certain facts about Holmes's arch-villain, or vaguely drawn desperate situation which brought her to be Moriarty's pawn. Irene from *Sherlock*, on the other hand, appears to be quite informed as to Moriarty's nature, and as sinister as him: "I had all this stuff, never knew what to do with it. Thank God for the consulting criminal . . . Didn't even ask for anything. I think he just likes to cause trouble. Now that's my kind of man." Admittedly, though, the most recent take on the heroine, in the series' finale of the CBS *Elementary* (2013), provides us with even more immediate association between the two.

⁷ At this point, it might be relevant to mention one of the other possible interpretations of the final scene. Due to its fragmentary nature and the fact that it is stylistically different from how the rest of the episode is shot, some of the viewers read "the rescuing scene" as Sherlock's dream-like fantasy (with a variety of possibilities of what actually happened to the heroine). This assumption, however, does not make up for the fact that in the previous scene Irene was beaten by Sherlock in the mind-game they were playing against each other, which ended up in her begging him for mercy. Thus, even in this interpretation the heroine does not escape the role of "a damsel in distress."

After all, if Sherlock turned up to rescue Irene, this must be indicative of his sentiment towards her, a sentiment, in his own words, “found in the losing side.” Also, since we have already mentioned the issue of “labelling” Irene, it should be pointed out that in the last line of the episode, Sherlock fondly refers to her as “The woman. *The* woman,” thus coming full circle to the original story.

Finally, the term “transmedia storytelling” – a concept discussed at large in the publications of Henry Jenkins – is worth mentioning to explain an idea of how the transformation of Irene Adler in later works could be perceived. Transmedia storytelling expects us to build our knowledge of the fictional world by looking not merely at the original or primary source, but also at information on the story’s universe across different works and media. It proposes an idea that the totality of derivative work is as important in comprehending such transmedia stories as the original source on which they are based. As expressed by Jenkins:

This process of world-building encourages an encyclopedic impulse in both readers and writers. We are drawn to master what can be known about a world which always expands beyond our grasp. This is a very different pleasure than we associate with the closure found in most classically constructed narratives, where we expect to leave the theatre knowing everything that is required to make sense of a particular story.

This might as well be applied to the *Sherlock* series, or – more precisely – the series falls within the body of fan work of a larger transmedia fandom. The method with which the creators of the show tackled the canon has already been discussed, but it has not yet been mentioned that because of such a casual, although not dismissive, attitude towards the original and the mix and match approach presupposing fan-based knowledge of viewers, this adaptation is, in many ways, similar to fan fiction. As in the case of fan fiction, the original story is not the only source of inspiration for Steven Moffat’s reinvention of Irene Adler. Actually, there is no definite end to the references that might be included in a transmedia story, of which the *Sherlock* series is clearly an example. This probably accounts for the phenomenon of fandoms flourishing on the Internet, a place where a fanbase has the best possible means of encompassing (although collectively rather than individually) the totality of the fictional universe. As fandoms grow larger than ever before due to the Internet’s availability in this day and age, their members become the intended audience of derivative works, such as adaptations. Not only are they well-acquainted with the canon, which enables them to spot all the subtleties and allusions, but they also indirectly shape the content of the new work, as the authors like to play with their expectations. Therefore, the relationship between the fandom and the authors of derivative works evolves gradually into the one of interdependence. Also, because of the fans’ “encyclopaedic knowledge,” the notion of the canon itself changes, which has an influence on the new adaptations as well. For instance, what should be treated as the Canon in the case of the Sherlock Holmes fandom is no longer a question with an easy answer. Although there still exists some kind of hierarchy, placing the original Arthur Conan Doyle’s stories at the top, the boundaries between thus understood canon and the well-known pastiches or adaptations become blurred. A good representation of this process is the currently popular distinction in the Internet-based communities between the original canon (Doyle’s canon) and the *Sherlock* canon (meaning the information on the characters and their adventures which one could gather just from the series, and which obviously departs to a great extent from Doyle’s canon), among other so-called “canons.” What is more, for some of the readers and viewers these derivative works, not the original stories, become the first source of encounter with the characters, thus inevitably shaping their initial impressions and assumptions about the fictional universe. In point of fact, Irene Adler – like many other literary characters who

have been absorbed by popular culture – has not truly belonged to her original creator for a long time. Nor is she “owned” by the subsequent authors, who reinterpret Irene Adler for the new age. Her shape is ultimately determined by what she became, and is to become, in the collective consciousness of the recipients of culture. This approach also enables the character, now larger than the story itself, to endlessly transform according to the changing times, and gives an opportunity to reboot the heroine, instead of sending her on a literary exile.

The idea of fan fiction is to let your imagination run rampant, explore the possibilities of the characters, fill the gaps left by the original creator and approach the “what if” questions that arose over the years of reinterpreting, adapting and retelling the original. Indeed, Arthur Conan Doyle left enough gaps in “A Scandal in Bohemia” to raise speculations which, perhaps even more than the story itself, contributed to the heroine’s perception in the collective imagination. It may be that the writers of the *Sherlock* series are as much indebted to the pop-cultural image of Irene Adler and the expectations of the fandom as they are to the Doyle’s canon.

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