STUDIES IN ENGLISH LITERATURES

Volume 4 Edited by Koray Melikoğlu

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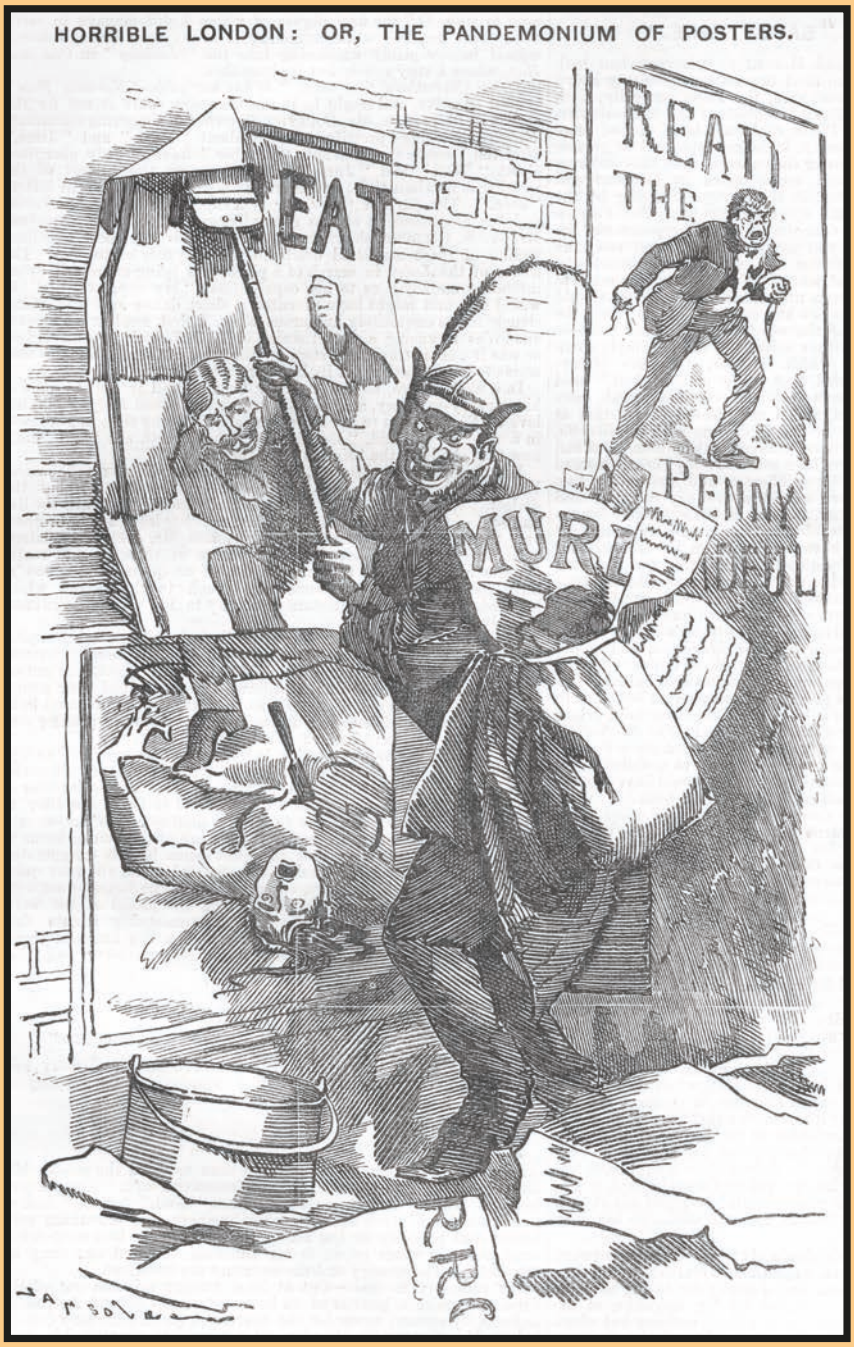
Formal Investigations



Aesthetic Style in Late-Victorian and Edwardian Detective Fiction

Second, Revised and Expanded Edition

ibidem

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No Respecter of Class: The Ubiquitous Appeal of Late-Victorian Crime Fiction

The cover illustration of this volume appears alongside a verse description of the same cartoon in the October 13th, 1888 edition of *Punch* magazine under the title of *Horrible London: Or, The Pandemonium of Posters*. The illustration portrays a bill-sticker pasting up posters that gaudily proclaim the thrills to be had reading stories of murder. The verse description predicts the delinquent social effect of such tales upon the lowest classes in society. Depicting this demonic figure advertising gory murder, alongside the written suggestion that crime narratives held a dangerous appeal for the urban working-classes, was particularly topical. The Ripper murders in London's East End had been headline news for several weeks. Many of the capital's lower classes were packed into the districts through which the Ripper prowled and avidly followed the newspapers' reports of the murders. *Punch* was simply bringing to the forefront of public debate the question of collusion between literature, crime and class.

The "penny dreadfuls" that the figure advertises in *Punch*'s illustration were cheap, lurid serial fictions aimed at the lower classes. By the last decades of the nineteenth century, the popularity and availability of these pulp serials in London made them a publishing phenomenon. If the verse alongside the cartoon suggests that this fiction "A sympathy morbid and monstrous must win / From the groveling victims of gloom and bad gin" (171), the illustration itself depicts a subject-matter that is no respecter of class: on the right-hand poster is the standard, bestial depiction of the dishevelled, working-class man, in his hand a dripping, bloody knife; but on the left-hand poster a gentleman crouches astride a lady in her death throes, a knife protruding from her chest while his face

and fist are contorted in, presumably, a murderous rage. The demon's paste-brush hides the initial letters of this second poster's legend, only leaving on display the word "EAT." Consumer appetites for these sensational crime stories were evidently worthy of serious interest to critics of the genre and its social influence. They certainly were to advertisers, authors, and to the publishing industry.

In the demon's hat is a long feather, and the obvious association of this adornment with a writer's quill marks the figure as not just the advertiser but the producer of crime fiction. The verse description of the demon's craft underscores an interpretation of the figure as author by emphasizing just this indulgence in craft. The demon is in "a novel disguise" (170), marking the literary form of his enterprise; his productions have "fiendish designs," "sinister lines," and display "the style of the vilest sensational prints / Or the vulgarest penny romances." Of course, if the demon-artist reproduces only "in the style" of these cheap forms then his own productions must presumably be something somewhat different. The initial suggestion of his being in a "novel" disguise reveals the genre in which middle-class readers of *Punch* would be more likely to find him.

Punch's concern then is not simply with the penny dreadfuls but with sensational crime fiction marketed also to the higher classes. The demon walks London "with wallet at waist" (170) and money could be made from all readers in the city, irrespective of their social station. The lurid appeal of a genre was not confined to the eastern slums of the city, and certainly reports of the Ripper's murders were closely followed by Whitechapel and West End readers equally. The first Sherlock Holmes mystery, *A Study in Scarlet*, had been serialized the year before in 1887 and had found an audience that transcended traditional class distinctions

and literary tastes; the *Punch* demon, ubiquitously fashionable, appears wearing a type of deerstalker hat, the style of headwear worn by Conan Doyle's famous detective. The cartoon's associations have a target clearly higher than those readers of only pulp fiction and the magazine's own middle- and upper-class subscribers are cases in point. Murder sold, then as now, and the more ambitious the story in terms of shocking detail and mystery, the more popular it was. The seeming ubiquity of the "pan-demon" of sensation fiction in urban markets becomes the targeted concern of *Punch*'s illustration and verse.

The irony of *Punch*'s depiction is, of course, that it indulges equally in attention-grabbing sensationalism. It is true that the demon's "sanguine paint-splashes" (170) are not reproduced in the black and white illustration, but the "horrible subject" portrayed with "flamboyant flare" certainly is. The magazine becomes another addition to the pandemoniac appeal of the genre. In presenting a critique employing the very sensationalist forms it criticizes, *Punch* both undercuts its own argument against the dangerously low appeal of sensation fiction, and demonstrates its popularity by presenting it appealingly to a higher class of reader. The attraction of this type of literature is linked explicitly by *Punch* to the manner of its presentation: the bold strokes of its depictions; the grotesque structure of its subject matter; the ordering of criminal transgression by aesthetic form. Whether through *Punch*'s own depiction with pen and ink or in the rhythms of its verse description, the penny dreadfuls or the serial adventures of Holmes, art orders sensation, making it amenable to the intellect if still titillating the lower instincts of readers. Aesthetic form as a vehicle for the depiction of transgression is simultaneously the means of structuring that disorder in a way which affords the possibility of comprehending criminal motive, method and manner.

The detective's craft is the personification of aesthetic ordering within crime fiction. The various methods pursued to solve crime are expected to allow the reformation of society after its being disrupted by criminal acts. Like *Punch*'s cartoon and verse, the genre sows disorder in the presentation of crime, but limits the effects of social fragmentation in the very structure of that presentation. But methods do vary: if Holmes could transmute the sensationalism of crime fiction into a rationally explained series of events, his fellow detectives were very often not so successful, or employed entirely different means to solving crimes. Scientific method is as frequently critiqued as followed in the texts of the period. The variety of approaches the detectives pursued can only be designated as similar in the attempts made to assign a meaning to the events under investigation. It is not unusual to discover in the solution to the crimes a sensationalist method that surpasses the depiction of the crimes themselves.

The essays in this volume explore a variety of structuring taxonomies, the relationships between the aesthetic forms, styles and methodologies of detective and crime fiction in the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods. The influences on the artists in the genre are as varied as the interests of the period in scientific method, forensics, archaeology, aesthetics, medicine, and the paranormal. But the formalizing tendencies of investigative process remain, and it is this adherence, in artist and detective alike, to seeing crime and its resolution as a stylistic imposition of structure on disorder that is under examination. If the *Punch* cartoon and verse ultimately suggest that the genre of crime fiction had a broad appeal that could not be restricted to traditional expectations of class reading appetites, so the texts themselves cross literary, taxonomic boundaries. The formal strategies deployed by author and detective proliferate and intersect with the manifold interests of the

late-Victorian and Edwardian periods, and their variety is examined in the following pages.

Rudolph Glitz begins the collection by investigating Conan Doyle's depiction of the relationship between narrative and literary realism. George M. Johnson continues this investigation of realism in Algernon Blackwood's stories, seeing the author as one of the first Modernists in his depiction of the imaginative potential of the new psychology. Paul Fox examines Arthur Machen as a proponent of the aesthetic of the 1890s, and Nick Freeman explores the aesthetic influence of Oscar Wilde upon the detective fiction of the same and following decade. Aaron Parrett interprets the stories of Robert Eustace and L. T. Meade as evidence of the aesthetic relationship between new scientific theories of degeneration and literature. Helen Sutherland continues this interest in literary concerns with the nineteenth-century advances in science by exploring Conan Doyle's and G. K. Chesterton's attitudes to geology in their fiction.

Elizabeth Anderman examines the use of Pater and Ruskin by Wilkie Collins as influences on how to read detective fiction. Lucy Sussex explores the connection between Anna Katherine Green's detective fiction and her husband Charles Rohlfs' furniture-making as redolent of an Arts and Crafts aesthetic. Alison Jaquet interprets Ellen Wood's Johnny Ludlow series as evidence of a relationship between domesticity and power structures. Therie Hendrey-Seabrook argues for an appreciation of a gendered fracture between female detective characters and their male counterparts in the fiction of the 1890s. Linda Schlossberg examines the work of E. C. Bentley as a modern detective novel that shows the flaws in a reliance on logic and deduction within the genre.

Paul Fox

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Horrifying Ho(l)mes: Conan Doyle's Bachelor Detective and the Aesthetics of Domestic Realism

Rudolph Glitz
University of Amsterdam

Abstract: This chapter investigates the various Sherlock Holmes stories that are concerned with domestic crimes or misdemeanours. With reference to these as well as various programmatic statements by Balzac and Zola, it highlights the striking but as yet barely explored connection between Holmes' professional outlook as a provider of narrative solutions and the aesthetics of French literary realism as opposed to realism in the broader sense of the term. This connection is not only well worth noting in its own right, but can also help illuminate several meta-fictional strategies and intertextual allusions in Conan Doyle's detective fiction.

I

On the way to a crime scene in "The Adventure of the Copper Beeches" (1892), Sherlock Holmes surprises Watson with a chilling observation:

> You look at these scattered houses, and you are impressed by their beauty. I look at them, and the only thought which comes to me is a feeling of their isolation and of the impunity with which crime may be committed there. [. . .] They always fill me with a certain horror. (363)[1]

[1] Unless otherwise indicated, all page references are to the relevant volumes of Klinger, which I choose here over the in some respects more scholarly Oxford edition of 1993 because of the more detailed background information provided and Klinger's sometimes useful inclusion of so-called Sherlockian or Sherlockological debates (i.e. usually tongue-in-cheek debates by amateur scholars about Holmes

"Who would associate crime with those dear old homesteads," Watson asks in response, but the houses' peaceful appearance is not the only reason why the declaration seems unusual. As we know since Holmes' cold-blooded shooting of the hound of the Baskervilles (589), "horror" is not one of his most frequently expressed emotions, and it might be worth asking what exactly that feeling consists of here. The houses in question are situated in the spacious Hampshire countryside – as opposed to any densely populated city where, as Holmes further explains, there is "no lane so vile that the scream of a tortured child, or the thud of a drunkard's blow, does not beget sympathy and indignation among the neighbours" (363). This dead-pan explanation is revealing. Even though, at first sight, the contrast seems to be simply between town and country, the detective's suggestive reference to children and drunkards adds to his comments a more far-reaching socio-political thrust. It invokes two stereotypes of Victorian family life gone bad, two of the more notorious by-products of that self-enclosed and patriarchally governed privacy which, while perhaps most strikingly embodied by the isolated country house, had long been generally accepted as the ideal of middle-class domesticity. According to the governmental census report of 1851, the Englishman's own free-standing domicile throws "a sharp, well-defined circle round his family and hearth," and it is simply "in the order of nature that a family should live in a separate house" (xxxv-xxxvi).[2]

"the man" as opposed to fictional character). Original publication dates will be given upon first mention in the main text.

[2] Regarding the commonplace nature of marital abuse in the Victorian period, cf., for instance, Watson's remarks on the subject in "A Case of Identity" (75) and the various primary documents – including the sketch from *Punch* – that Klinger adduces in the corresponding footnote. That the maltreatment of children was similarly familiar to the Victorian public is amply illustrated by, and in fact largely due to, contempo-

The English are, of course, not the only nineteenth-century society for whom the self-enclosed family unit constitutes the social norm. As I will show throughout this chapter, Holmes' prosaic horror of its latent cruelties can be seen as part of a literary development that spread throughout Europe and was largely centred in France. This is not to say that I am in any way challenging the story-internal psychological reasons for the bachelor detective's aversion to family life. According to both Watson and Holmes, in "A Scandal in Bohemia" (1891) and *The Sign of Four* (1890), it is clearly the latter's professionalism, his fear of being emotionally incapacitated in his profession of a "reasoning and observing machine" that forms the primary motive for his marital abstinence ("Scandal" 5; see also *Sign* 378). Over and above this reason, however, (as well as several others) one can explain Holmes' in Watson's eyes rather peculiar horror at the more abstract level of literary genre. By analysing, for the most part, those stories of the Holmes canon in which the detective encounters, and occasionally shows himself unsettled by, what can broadly be classed as domestic crimes, I will highlight a literary allegiance of his that has so far been neglected by scholars.

The figure of Holmes has been compared to many social, ideological, and literary types. Reading Watson as a Boswellian biographer, for example, Richard D. Altick likens the detective to Dr Johnson. Ian Ousby points out Holmes' resemblance to Darwinian scientists of the type of Huxley (154-55) as well as, in the early novels, contemporary decadents (156-57). Rosemary Hennessy and Rajeswari Mohan see him as embodying "the interests of the middle-class, western, white male" (338). Dennis Porter compares him, together with the literary detective in general, to "a well-

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rary novelists such as Dickens and Gaskell. For a detailed overview of recent studies of Victorian domesticity, see Chase and Levinson.

trained critic" (226). Without taking issue with these varied – and variedly plausible – characterisations of Holmes' outlook, I would add to them by arguing that his perspective on traditional domesticity, and thus part of the Holmes *corpus* as a whole, is quite manifestly rooted in the nineteenth-century aesthetics of French literary realism. By doing so, I aim to go beyond the standard and usually pejorative characterisation of the Holmes stories as typical examples of "realism" in a broader and often misleading sense of the term. Working within a more clearly defined and historically circumscribed framework, I hope to bring out the complex generic tensions in the stories, which regularly juxtapose recognisably realist themes and plot lines with elements from competing traditions such as Gothic or sensation fiction.

II

A rather typical association of the Holmes stories with the concept of realism can be found in Catherine Belsey's influential textbook classic *Critical Practice*. In order to demonstrate the interpretive methods of Pierre Macherey and Roland Barthes, Belsey subjects some of Conan Doyle's detective fiction to a reading against the grain that, although briskly persuasive overall, is not quite conceptually consistent. For while Belsey initially describes the Holmes stories as among "other forms besides realist fiction" (100-01), this generic distinction of hers gradually breaks down in the heat of interpretation: "The project of the stories themselves," she claims, "enigma followed by disclosure, echoes precisely the structure of the classic realist text. The narrator himself draws attention to the parallels between them" (103). After quoting a passage from "The Adventure of the Crooked Man" (1893), which demonstrates this precise echoing, Belsey continues to blur her initial distinction:

> The project also requires the maximum degree of "realism" – verisimilitude, plausibility. In the interest of science no hint of the fantastic or the implausible is permitted to remain once the disclosure is complete. This is why even their own existence as writing is so frequently discussed within the texts. The stories are alluded to as Watson's "little sketches," his "memoirs." They resemble fictions because of Watson's unscientific weakness for story-telling. [. . .] In other words, the fiction itself accounts even for its own fictionality, and the text thus appears wholly transparent. (103-04)

Belsey's insights into Conan Doyle's narrative strategies are relevant in their own right, and I will return to them later. At this point, however, note more generally her increasing identification of the Holmes stories with not only "the classic realist text" but also "realism" in the broader sense of "verisimilitude, plausibility." These dominant realist allegiances are subverted, according to her, by the recurrent surfacing of female sexuality as a suppressed because rationally inexplicable factor in many of Holmes' adventures (see 101-02 and 104-07). Yet despite this "implicit critique of their limited nature," Belsey still concludes her discussion by labelling the stories as "characteristic examples of classic realism" (107) and thus conflates what she initially described as similar but separate.

For the most part, the conceptual contradictions in Belsey's account can be ascribed to her wavering use of the term "realism" (even where she qualifies it with "classic"). On the one hand, and in fact predominantly, she uses the term to refer to an epistemologically defined mode of writing. This mode of writing is by no means ahistorical: in her first chapter Belsey links it "roughly to

the last two centuries" and "the period of industrial capitalism" (7). Yet within these broad parameters, it can appear almost anywhere in fiction, drama, or even poetry, and is certainly not limited to a specific group of works.[3] On the other hand, and although she never actually defines it as such, Belsey occasionally seems to relapse into an alternative use of the term as designating a more or less clearly defined literary canon. When she initially locates the Holmes *corpus* outside "classic realism," she presumably means by the latter a body of texts regarded as more serious in their mimetic pursuits than the popular crime and adventure story, a body of texts which would include the works of Honoré de Balzac, for instance, or later in England, say, George Eliot's and Thomas Hardy's.[4] However theoretically useful Belsey's broader understanding of the term may be, and although, in the last analysis, the two might not be entirely separable, it is primarily this second, more narrow and historically established use of "realism" that I will adopt in my discussion.

This methodological preference conforms largely with that of another scholarly account of the Holmes stories. In his Bourdieu-informed study *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice, 1880-1914*, Peter D. McDonald maps out the early Conan Doyle's complex aesthetic allegiances within the contemporary literary field. Locating the author's professional role between the two extremes of "purist" and "profiteer," McDonald describes him as "a populist with high aspirations who became increasingly anxious about his own literary standing" (121). In this context, he refers to

[3] Immediately after the Holmes stories, Belsey discusses Matthew Arnold's ode "The Scholar-Gypsy." In fact, as shown by her references to Ruskin's theory of painting (cf. 7-9), the "expressive realism" she defines in her first chapter is not even specific to literature.

[4] Cf. 96 and also footnote 2 on 101, where Belsey invokes the question of canonicity (though not that of the "realist" canon in particular) and refers readers to Eagleton.

a historically very specific (if still many-sided) tradition of literary realism:

> The characteristic precariousness of [Conan Doyle's] position can initially be seen in his attitude to the various styles of literary Realism prevalent in the 1890s. Believing that issues of literary taste were best considered in a "broad and catholic spirit," he welcomed and, at times, vigorously supported, avant-garde experimentation despite his own less radical aesthetic and generic preferences. If he considered controversial New Women novelists like Hardy and "Lucas Malet" "extreme men" [. . .] he granted them their "mission," which was to "pave the way," and hoped they would help break the "spell of Puritanism" that had, in his view, prevailed in England for too long. Similarly – albeit even more prudently – in late 1889, when the controversy surrounding Henry Vizetelly's publication of Zola was still very much in the air, he described Zola's naturalist novels as "careful and candid" and noted their influence on George Moore's *A Mummer's Wife* (1885). (121-22)[5]

In view of, especially, "the Holmes saga with its celebrated male friendship," McDonald later links Conan Doyle with Stevensonian Romance rather than realism, classes him as a "manly Romantic" in contrast to the "manly Realists" grouped around the *New Review* and its influential editor W. E. Henley (123). Yet this overall assessment of the Holmes *corpus* does not necessarily apply to

[5] McDonald's quotations are from, in that order, the anonymous "A Dinner to Dr. Doyle" (1896), Blathwayt's interview with "Doyle" (1893), and the latter's own "Mr. Stevenson's Methods in Fiction" (1890).

each story or aspect of the stories in detail. It is precisely the tradition of realist writing in Britain as presented in McDonald's study whose presence in the Holmes stories I will trace in the following – a tradition, that is to say, which consists to a large extent of imported French fiction and, especially in its naturalist manifestations, was regarded as both "experimental" and "avant-garde" during the late nineteenth century.

III

That Conan Doyle's detective fiction actively engages with the aesthetics of nineteenth-century realism is, first of all, reflected in a number of striking analogies between Holmes' professional outlook and that of the realist writer. The aesthetic principles of nineteenth-century realism were, one can assume, much more present to contemporary readers than they are to us – especially when they caused controversy. Yet even today, the connection seems rather an obvious one to draw. After all, scholars such as Belsey regularly describe Holmes' unshakeable epistemological confidence as an example of scientific positivism (103), of the same school of thought, in other words, that famously provided with a philosophical basis the most notoriously radical form of literary realism: I am referring to the circle around the French novelist Emile Zola, of course, some of whose programmatic pronouncements might very well constitute a direct source of the detective's aesthetic ideals.

The affinities between the naturalist variant of realism and Sherlock Holmes' criminological outlook are already visible in their publicised origins. As Conan Doyle gratefully acknowledged, much of the figure, methods, and even appearance of the detective was modelled on the Edinburgh diagnostician and dedicatee of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892): "my old

teacher Joseph Bell, MD, &c."[6] Conan Doyle wrote to Bell that Holmes was built "round the centre of deduction and inference and observation which I have heard you inculcate," and in his autobiography he says of his teacher that "if he were a detective, he would surely reduce this fascinating but unorganized business to something nearer an exact science."[7] All this is closely analogous not just to Holmes', but also Zola's view of his profession, and for the French novelist, similarly, it was the work of an eminent physician that best exemplified the aesthetics of his movement. Basing his polemic defense of the "experimental novel" on Claude Bernard's *Introduction à l'étude de la médecine expérimentale* (1865), Zola, too, invokes the authority of science and stresses the importance of observation:

> The naturalistic novelists observe and experiment, and [. . .] all their work is the offspring of the doubt which seizes them in the presence of truths little known and phenomena unexplained, until an experimental idea rudely awakens their genius some day, and urges them to make an experiment, to analyze facts, and to master them. (309)

Zola's description of the naturalist writer (see also 306), bears obvious resemblances to Conan Doyle's methodical detective. It recalls both his famous powers of observation and his at least initially "experimental" reconstructions of the crimes he uncovers – even if, unlike the novelist, Holmes is usually "reasoning backwards," as he puts it in *A Study in Scarlet* of 1887 (198).

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[6] This dedication is reproduced in Green's Oxford edition, 3.

[7] Conan Doyle's writings are not always readily accessible – in this case his autobiographical *Memories and Adventures*. My quotations are from Klinger's introductory essay "The World of Sherlock Holmes," xvii-lxvii (xxiv), and double-checked against Stashower 28.

Conan Doyle's Bohemian detective, then, shares with Zola's naturalist novelist his claim to scientific practices and the epistemological authority provided by them. Though the radical emphasis put on this claim might be a distinctive feature of naturalism in particular, as a basic aesthetic tendency it also characterises the realist genre as a whole. Gustave Flaubert's quasi-scientific ideal of authorial impartiality famously led to the court proceedings against *Madame Bovary* (1857), and in an even earlier text by Balzac, the "Preface to *The Human Comedy*" (1842), accurate observation, systematic classification, and the search for causes had already become crucial elements of the aesthetics of the novel:

> A writer could, if he adopted this method of rigorous literal reproduction, become a [. . .] painter of human types, narrator of the dramas of private life, archaeologist of social furniture, classifier of professions, and recorder of good and evil; but if I was to deserve the praises which any artist must aspire to, I must needs study the *causes or central cause* of these social facts. (144)

Holmes' extensive criminalistic filing system, his "great book" (1278) as invoked for instance in "The Adventure of the Red Circle" (1911) suggests at least some of these writerly qualities. And so does his voracious yet methodical interest in material signs. When the detective draws attention to the tell-tale outward traces of other people's professions, milieux, and states of mind, he resembles the realist novelist capturing the different "habits, clothing, words and dwellings of a prince, banker, artist, bourgeois, priest, or poor man" (Balzac 142). One could further point to Holmes' didactic bent, which, too, has a counterpart in Balzac's preface (see 144); or, at a more abstract level, to the rigid ideology the detective is held to promote for instance in Rosemary Jann's

"Sherlock Holmes Codes the Social Body," and which also underpins Balzac's project of fixing in writing "the panorama of society" (145). These and similar correspondences between Holmes' professional outlook and that of the realist writer all strongly reinforce, and add special significance to, more direct invocations of literary realism in the stories.

IV

The most striking invocations of realism in the actual text of Conan Doyle's crime fiction can usually be found in Holmes and Watson's meta-fictional dialogues. It may be true that, as Belsey points out, the detective's comments on his friend's "little sketches" add verisimilitude by accounting for the latter's fictionality (in the sense of "craftedness"). Yet this is by no means their only function. Additionally loaded, I would argue, with more specific generic and aesthetic implications, they enact within many of the Holmes texts the very clash of values that preoccupied Conan Doyle throughout his career, namely that between serious art and popular entertainment or – which at the time practically amounted to the same – between realism and fantasy. The "realism of the late century," in the words of George Levine, "defines itself against the excesses, both stylistic and narrative, of various kinds of romantic, exotic, or sensational literatures" (5). And as one might expect after the above, the Bohemian detective regularly makes the case for realism, whereas Watson speaks in favour of fantasy and "imaginative" writing – supported, presumably, at least to some extent by the general reading public.[8]

[8] Watson's initial claim, in *A Study in Scarlet*, about his friend's remarkable "ignorance [. . .] of contemporary literature" (32) is of course thoroughly invalidated in many of the subsequent additions to the saga, for which Conan Doyle deliberately modified his character.

Several of the meta-fictional encounters between Holmes and Watson occur in the novels and in the two adventures narrated by Holmes himself. In *The Sign of Four*, for example, the detective deplores Watson's "romanticism" (217) and in "The Adventure of the Blanched Soldier" he remembers criticising Watson for his "pandering to popular taste" (1485). Yet by far the highest proportion of such dialogue takes place in a particular group of stories, whose composition, I would suggest, is far from coincidental. "The Adventure of the Speckled Band" (1892), that of the "Copper Beeches" (1892), of the "Abbey Grange" (1904), of the "Creeping Man" (1923), of the "Sussex Vampire" (1924), and, most revealingly as well as earliest, "A Case of Identity" (1891) – these stories are united by the fact that, while published at vastly different stages of Conan Doyle's career, they all share a common kind of setting that is itself broadly evocative of nineteenth-century realism. I am referring to the distinctive social domain that forms the more narrowly thematic concern of my discussion, i.e. familial domesticity. Its frequent concurrence with meta-fictional dialogue that deals with questions of genre and aesthetics is the first point to be noted about this setting to whose specific realist implications I will return later.

The one aspect of Watson's writing of which Holmes consistently expresses his approval – albeit still with some reservations – is his selection of interesting cases. This "atones for much," according to Holmes, who, in "The Abbey Grange," goes on to criticise his friend for dwelling "upon sensational details which may excite, but cannot possibly instruct, the reader" and thereby ruining "what might have been an instructive and even classical series of demonstrations" (1159). When, in "The Adventure of the Copper Beeches," the detective expands a little more on the positive

qualities of Watson's writing, he reveals two particularly notable elements of his aesthetics:

> "To the man who loves art for its own sake," remarked Sherlock Holmes, tossing aside the advertisement sheet of *The Daily Telegraph*, "it is frequently in its least important and lowliest manifestations that the keenest pleasure is to be derived. It is pleasant to me to observe, Watson, that you have so far grasped this truth that in these little records of our cases which you have been good enough to draw up, and, I am bound to say, occasionally to embellish, you have given prominence not so much to the many *causes célèbres* and sensational trials in which I have figured, but rather to those incidents which may have been trivial in themselves, but which have given room for those faculties of deduction and of logical synthesis which I have made my special province." (351)

In addition to what has already been said about the differing ideals of the two friends, this passages reveals Holmes' aesthetic position as one that precariously straddles, on the one hand, disinterested artistic purity ("art for art's sake") and, on the other, an unflagging interest in the "least important and lowliest" to be found in, for instance, *The Daily Telegraph* – commonplace everyday mass culture in other words. Thus caught between two aesthetic poles, the detective lives out a contradiction notoriously prominent in the careers of many realist writers.

In Paul Barolsky's article "The Case of the Domesticated Aesthete," Holmes is compared with, among other artistic figures, Flaubert, who "once remarked that in writing Madame Bovary he steered a precarious course between the vulgar and the lyrical" (440). Given Flaubert's reputation as a pioneering realist, this

comparison is no less apt in the context of my present argument. As is already indicated by his title, Barolsky is mainly concerned with the "lyrical" side of the detective. He reads Holmes as primarily an aesthete, an artistic "connoisseur" (447) who is constantly seeking to "escape from the 'commonplace'" (439). Yet just like in the case of the realist writer (another example would be the brothers Goncourt), this is only part of the story. Holmes might share Watson's disapproval of "the trivial" as such – later on in "The Copper Beeches" he suspects Watson of having succumbed to it and deplores the seeming triviality of his client's introductory note (353). At the same time, however, he wholeheartedly embraces it in typical realist fashion, namely when it can serve as raw material for his art. And judging by what is arguably the most explicit statement of his realist sympathies, it does so far more often than not.

The statement I am referring to is the opening paragraph of "A Case of Identity." Not only does it reveal Holmes' professional interest in the commonplace as opposed to the "queer [. . .] strange [. . .] wonderful," and "*outré*" (74), but in fact – and wholly in the spirit of contemporary realist writers such as, for instance, Arnold Bennett – collapses the distinction altogether:[9]

> "My dear fellow," said Sherlock Holmes as we sat on either side of the fire in his lodgings at Baker Street, "life is infinitely stranger than anything which the mind of man could invent. We would not dare to conceive the things which are really mere commonplaces of existence. If we could fly out of that window hand in hand, hover over this

[9] See, for example, Bennett's preface to *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908), where he elevates the general aging process to the status of "a tragedy" of "extreme pathos" (31-32).

> great city, gently remove the roofs, and peep in at the queer things which are going on, the strange coincidences, the plannings, the crosspurposes, the wonderful chains of events, working through generations, and leading to the most *outré* results, it would make all fiction with its conventionalities and foreseen conclusions most stale and unprofitable." (74)

Holmes' rapture in view of everyday reality is reinforced here by his Dickensian vision of himself and Watson practically removing what, in the realist theatre of their time, was becoming known as the "fourth wall" (although, in this case, it is strictly speaking the roof, of course). In another, and rather sophisticated intertextual twist, Conan Doyle also has Holmes invert Hamlet's famous disgust for "this world," "stale and unprofitable" (1.2), by substituting for the latter the conventions of popular fiction. Given his narrative reliance on these very conventions in his chronicling of Holmes' exploits, Watson naturally disagrees with his friend's assessment, and in the process explicitly identifies his own aesthetic anathema: "I am not convinced of it. [. . .] We have in our police reports *realism pushed to its extreme limits*, and yet the result is, it must be confessed, neither fascinating nor artistic" (74; my emphasis).

Predictably, the realist Holmes in turn rejects Watson's generic categorisation of police reports. In the following, invoking the argument of selectivity, he contrasts the "platitudes of the magistrate" (74) with the detailed observations of what Zola calls the "examining magistrates of men and their passion" (308), with realism proper, in other words. Another notable feature of Holmes' reply here is his defensive endorsement of the "realistic effect," a literary term whose technical sophistication alone would remind at

least some early readers of the contemporary critical debates on the subject:

> "A certain selection and discretion must be used in producing a realistic effect," remarked Holmes. "This is wanting in the police report, where more stress is laid, perhaps, upon the platitudes of the magistrate than upon the details, which to an observer contain the vital essence of the whole matter. Depend upon it, there is nothing so unnatural as the commonplace." (74)

Evidently, terms such as "commonplace" can easily shift their meanings in the literary squabbles between Holmes and Watson, which might cause some confusion if one compares them across several different texts.[10] Nonetheless, there should be little doubt by now about Conan Doyle's clearly marked oppositional treatment of, on the one hand, Holmes, the criminological purist committed more or less exclusively to the key aesthetic principles of contemporary avant-garde realism, and, on the other hand, Watson, the populariser of Holmes' detections who regards his work primarily as entertainment and respects at least some of the conventions of fantastic, sensational, and romantic fiction. Needless to say, the dialectic combination of their two stances reflects quite closely the author's own position within the contemporary literary field, a position that hovered, as we know from McDonald (121), between the two extremes of "purist" and "profiteer."

[10] When, for example, at the beginning of "The Adventure of the Speckled Band," Watson speaks of Holmes' exclusive interest in "the unusual, or even the fantastic" (227), this could well be explained by the doctor's more easily excitable eye for these qualities.