

**THE SECRET FILES OF DR WATSON:
THREE NEO-VICTORIAN ADAPTATIONS OF *THE
ADVENTURES OF SHERLOCK HOLMES***

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Introduction

“That 19th-century English novels continue to be written today with troubling frequency is a tribute to the strength of Eliot’s example and to the nostalgia we feel for that noble form. Eliot would be proud. But should we be? For where is our fiction, our 21st-century fiction?”

Zadie Smith, on George Eliot's *Middlemarch*

“Why should either of you help me – a stranger who's alone in a forbidden place?”

'Perhaps because we, too, are strangers here,' Holmes said, his voice now full of a much more genuine sort of emotion. 'And we are more than familiar with forbidden places...’”

Caleb Carr, *The Italian Secretary*, p.134

What does it mean to be a Victorian? Surely, this is a question that is easy to answer: a Victorian is anyone who lived under the rule of Queen Victoria, that is to say from 1837 to 1901 -in other words, a fairly extended period of time. But that definition is too simple to truly account for the complex reality of such a society. Victorianism, as a concept, spanned a large number of research fields: science, literature, economics, religion, spirituality... There were more innovations during this time than -arguably- during any other period in the history of modern Britain; more famous people whose names are still revered today than anyone could count. The Victorian age saw the twilight of an empire, and the rise of contemporary British society; the death of Victoria in the early 20th century marked a turning point in the history of Great-Britain, and in the way it represented itself in the eyes of the world. But, mostly, the Victorian age was an age of stories; an age that saw the final stages in the development of the modern novel, but also the birth of sensationalism and serialized fictions, the timid emergence of previously unheard voices and the rise to international fame of literary giants. That the legacy -or *legacies*- of such a prolific and complex society still needs to be examined today should therefore not come as a surprise to us: in many ways, we are the children of the Victorian era; we still read the same authors, learn from the same sources, speak the same language; they seem closer to us in spirit than any other society. This is precisely why Victorianism should be challenged, and this is what Zadie Smith implies when she asks (rhetorically) if we should be proud of repeating the same patterns: losing oneself in the past prevents from moving on and onwards, which is what all societies should strive for.

Now, how does one challenge the Victorian legacy? In literature, there have been two main answers: either you try to create something entirely different and in total contradiction with it, or you re-invest it with a new perspective, in order to make new discourses emerge. This research paper will focus on the study of the second proposition, which was the basis for the creation of the movement known as neo-Victorianism (a term coined in 1997 by Dana Shiller in an article entitled “The Redemptive Past in the Neo-Victorian Novel”). Since then, the importance of neo-Victorianism on the literary scene has never ceased to grow, and it branched out to a variety of other genres and sub-genres such as historical fiction, post-colonial writing, steampunk, crime novel and many others; similarly, the interest of the critics for this movement seems to have no end. What is, exactly, neo-Victorianism? Dana Shiller defines it, quite broadly, as “those novels that adopt a post-modern approach to history and that are set at least partly in the nineteenth century” (p. 558), and she identifies at least three different trends: “texts that revise Victorian precursors, texts that imagine new adventures for familiar Victorian characters and 'new' Victorian fictions that imitate nineteenth-century literary conventions” (*ibid.*). It is absolutely blatant that these three categories are not mutually exclusive, and that one text may belong to one, two or even all three of them; what matters, however, is that Shiller shows both an impulse towards categorization of neo-Victorian novels that will continue, and the difficulties of that categorization such as they have been faced by many other readers and critics (and, at times, by the authors themselves). The idea of a “post-modern approach” to the Victorian era is interesting, as it reveals the extent of the fascination of which neo-Victorianism is the embodiment: the Victorian era is at once a source of attraction and a target of criticism. The need to question, to challenge the legacy that the Victorians have left us is linked with epistemology: in many aspects, going back to the Victorian era is also a way to retrace the evolution that has brought us where we are, a way to understand the way the world turns in the twenty-first century.

In this research paper, we will discuss one of the most famous literary creations of the late nineteenth century: Arthur Conan Doyle's *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, a series of four novels and fifty-six short stories, published between 1887 and 1927. We will analyse it from a neo-Victorian perspective, first because it has been one of the Victorian literary landmarks that have been re-invested the most (which gives us the choice between many texts), but mostly because Conan Doyle's tales revolve around social, scientific and moral issues that are still relevant today; therefore, confronting the original perspective with that adopted by the “post-Doylians” is bound to be interesting.¹ We have chosen to limit our corpus to three

¹ The term “post-Doylian” was used by *The Times* literary reviewer Marcel Berlins to speak of Caleb Carr, on

novels and a graphic novel: Anthony Horowitz's *The House of Silk* (2011), Caleb Carr's *The Italian Secretary* (2005), Michael Dibdin's *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story* (1978) and its graphic novel adaptation by Olivier Cotte and Jules Stromboni, *L'ultime défi de Sherlock Holmes* (2010).² We have chosen these four works because they more or less correspond to three different trends that we have been able to identify in the large number of holmesian adaptations (Holmes Vs. Jack the Ripper, Holmes Vs. the supernatural, and traditional holmesian fictions following the main rules established by Conan Doyle), but also, in a way, to all three of Dana Shiller's previously quoted categories. We should also be using this introduction to clear out matters concerning the typology of the three novels that form our corpus in relation to the adaptation studies: are they holmesian pastiches, parodies, or something else entirely? The answer to this question will have to wait, however, as it requires a longer development; for now, since they are also quite significantly different from one another, we will refer to them as a whole as holmesian adaptations, a quite neutral term, that here does not apply to a change of medium (except for *L'ultime défi de Sherlock Holmes*) but to a change of authorship.

The main question this research project is interested in concerns the creation and perpetuation of literary icons in relation to adaptive studies, more precisely how the central place that Holmes and Watson have in modern culture can be explained both by the novelty and originality they represented in Victorian popular literature, but also by the availability of the two characters for any kind of adaptation that was promoted almost right from the start by none other than Conan Doyle himself. In order to give a (hopefully) satisfying answer to that question, we will have to start with the creation of the two characters in 1886/1887 in *A Study in Scarlet* and the subsequent development of the *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* into a real canon, examining Conan Doyle's narratives in terms of literary experimentation and seeing what he did to ensure the possibility of adaptation for his characters. We will then take the opposite perspective, and try to show how the tradition of holmesian adaptations also stemmed from the self-contradictions in the canon, which is to say in spite of (or rather in opposition to) what Conan Doyle had initially planned; we will therefore examine the canon in terms of its legacy or, rather, legacies, and this will also enable us to identify the different traditions in holmesian adaptations, which we will illustrate through a compared analysis of three key aspects of the narratives under study. The final step in our research will be a more

the back cover of his novel *The Italian Secretary*. We will discuss the relevance of the term in more details later.

² The graphic novel is, as the reader may have guessed, of French origin, and its title is the translation of Dibdin's. In order to avoid any confusion between Dibdin's text and its graphic novel counterpart, we will always use the French title when referring to the graphic novel.

thorough discussion of each of these four adaptations, in an attempt to show that they all pay homage to Conan Doyle and his creation in very different (and sometimes conflicting) ways, thereby marking it as truly fit for any sort of adaptation; this will also be the occasion to reflect on the purpose and the status of each adaptation, both as an adaptation and as a piece of neo-Victorian fiction.

I) The making of icons, or How Conan Doyle created Holmes and Watson to last

A) From another popular hero to the first detective: the creation of a new literary genre

1] Breaking away from traditional popular literature:

When Conan Doyle started considering a writing career, due to his lack of patients and increased boredom with medicine, he set himself high standards: he would be the new Walter Scott or nothing. However, he soon became more renowned for his popular fictions (Holmes, and later Challenger) than for his historical novels (*Micah Clarke* and *The White Company*). At a time where the market was “flooded with cheap fiction”, the success of Conan Doyle's tales can definitely be explained by his yearning for literary recognition, and the heart and mind he consequently put in his writing.³ From the very beginning, the adventures of Holmes and Watson had in fact nothing to do with the sort of sensational novels that Ward, Lock & Company (for example) were used to publishing. Indeed, Conan Doyle was a man to whom moral values were important, and we could argue that the whole of the holmesian canon rested on one theoretical basis from its very beginning.

The first belief that Conan Doyle displayed regularly in the canon was that scientific progress could help improving not only life in general but also man -morally and philosophically speaking-. This reminds us of the French tradition of positivism led by Auguste Comte, a movement that must have had an influence on Conan Doyle's creation. Indeed, if one remembers well, the aim of positivism was to turn natural phenomena into something predictable and understandable by resorting to scientific methods of observation, experimentation and analysis; it sought to replace any form of philosophical or metaphysical theories with pure rationality and empiricism. We will see later that Conan Doyle made some personal adjustments to this doctrine, but he nonetheless believed that it was his duty as a writer and a doctor to spread the belief in science through popular fiction. We could sum this up by stating that rather than adapting his writing to reach more readers, Conan Doyle's real aim through his popular works (Holmes's investigations at first, but also the adventures of Professor Challenger) was to shape the readers to enable them to enjoy a popular fiction with

³ The quote refers directly to the first favourable answer Conan Doyle received for his manuscript of *A Study in Scarlet* from Ward, Lock and Company. We reproduce it here, as it can be found in David Stuart Davies's introduction to the 2004 edition of *A Study in Scarlet & The Sign of the Four* published by Wordsworth Classics: “[We] could not publish it this year as the market is flooded at present with cheap fiction, but if you do not object to its being held over till next year, we will give you £25 for the copyright.” (VIII)

higher standards of writing.

This desire to educate the lower classes through literature and to make what we could call “scientific proselytism” is particularly visible through the character of Watson. Indeed, when the detective is content just to solve the problems alone, and then to boast about his prowesses, Watson organizes the narration in such a way as the reader is entertained by the case while at the same time understanding the rational process that led Holmes to the conclusion of the investigation. Interestingly enough, this is precisely what Holmes reproaches Watson's accounts, as we can see in the first chapter of *The Sign of the Four* (the second novel in the canon, published as early as 1890): to betray scientific objectivity by mixing it with literature in order to make it enjoyable (Holmes states quite plainly that “the only point in the case which deserved mention was the curious analytical reasoning from effects to causes by which I succeeded in unravelling it” 111). At the same time, the fascination for science they display is not lost on the readers; and Holmes himself acknowledges (in the first lines of *The Copper Beeches*) that Watson has given more prominence to the small but interesting cases, in which the detective could show the full range of his analytical skills, than “to the many *causes célèbres* and sensational trials in which [Holmes] [has] figured” (COPP 211). Watson himself repeatedly stresses that his main reason for choosing to chronicle one case instead of another is that the former “offered a field for those peculiar qualities which [his] friend possessed in so high a degree, and which it is the object of these papers to illustrate” (this quote is from the first paragraph of *The Five Orange Pips*, p.85, but nearly thirty cases in the canon start with a similar statement). In this respect, one could argue that Holmes's investigations (and Professor Challenger's adventures) are scientific fictions as much as detective fictions, a genre now said to have been invented by Conan Doyle.

One could almost say that the main reason for the success of the holmesian canon is precisely what Holmes reproaches Watson, and what Conan Doyle has consciously been doing from the very start in the whole of his literary production: blending his fascination for a serious topic (be it scientific progress, the study of crime, or the links between history and culture), which he researches extensively, with old-fashioned *topoi* of popular fiction, especially of adventure novels or historical romances, in order not to lead the reader too far from his comfort zone. A striking example can be found in the compared analysis of all four novels of the canon: each time, the origin of the crime is to be found in a different (and usually remote) time and a different (and usually exotic) plase. In *A Study in Scarlet*, it is a family feud among the Latter-Day Saints in Salt Lake City in the late 1840s; in *The Sign of*

the Four, it originates in a secret pact between Indian mutineers and former British soldiers gone rogue in Agra circa 1857; the titular beast in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* comes from Dartmoor in the Middle-Ages (1640), but the murderous illegitimate son hid in South America in the 1860s; finally, the tragedy in *The Valley of Fear* was the direct consequence of a struggle between the Pinkerton detective agency and a gang of outlaws in Pennsylvania in the late 1870s. Moreover, except for *The Hound of the Baskerville*, all novels also feature a second part devoted entirely to the tale of the events that led to the crime in a flashback, without any intervention from the other characters (Holmes, Watson, the policemen). These flashbacks are often packed with more classical elements of popular fiction (romance, jealousy, action...) and with more characters that stem from old archetypes (the damsel in distress, the cunning villain, the morally and physically wicked savage...).

It could be argued that like Stevenson, who according to modern criticism used to codes of adventure novels only to subvert them (see, on that subject, Jean-Pierre Naugrette's and Gilles Menegaldo's excellent article in *R.L. Stevenson & A. Conan Doyle : Aventures de la fiction, Actes du colloque de Cerisy*), Conan Doyle created a new genre of popular fiction by putting together the new and the old. Let us not forget that the first collection of short stories was entitled "The *Adventures* of Sherlock Holmes." Even though the short stories are clearly more about investigations than actual adventures, the key elements of adventure novels are present, but in a different light: the Other is still present, both as a sources of fascination and as a potential (and sometimes actual) threat. However, that otherness is not merely there for the sake of exoticism: Holmes, as a detective and a rationalist, is eventually able to make sense of it and translate it in intelligible terms, and Watson completes the process by bringing this new knowledge home to the average British reader.

Unlike other pieces of popular fiction, the holmesian canon presents us with narratives that are quintessentially new and original. The tales are based on pre-existing *topoi*, mainly of adventure novels, but Conan Doyle manages to break free from the tradition by turning these *topoi* upside down and setting a new horizon of expectations for the readers. The fascination for the Other becomes, in these tales of suspense, of mystery and of concealment, a lurking fear of what is unknown and therefore threatening; but the mystery is always ultimately solved by Holmes, and explained by Watson in a sort of epiphanic moment for the reader. This structure corresponds very well to Conan Doyle's project in creating a new genre of popular fiction: both open the readers' minds to the idea of novelty and progress, and warn them that to change too much may result in alienation from one's country and values. In fact, when one reaches the end of *A Study in Scarlet*, one could infer Holmes's last line is also a

meta-fictional reflection by Conan Doyle, showing how aware he is of the difficulties of his own project: it is a Latin quote (not translated) from Horace which runs: “Populus me sibilat, at mihi plaudo/ Ipse domi simul ac nummos contemplar in arca” (it means “The public hisses at me, but I applaud myself in my own house, and simultaneously contemplate the money in my chest”).

2] Holmes & Watson : new archetypes, born from the ashes of other popular heroes

a) Greek mythology: Holmes, the new Odysseus?

Another inference we can make from that Latin quote is that the characters of Holmes and Watson are part of a tradition of popular heroes that can be traced back to Antiquity. As Katherine Wisser has shown in her thesis *The creation, reception and perpetuation of the Sherlock Holmes phenomenon (1887-1930)*, Conan Doyle's mother (to whom he was very close) was especially fond of genealogy and classical literature, and Conan Doyle grew up surrounded by books. But one does not need this sort of biographical data to see the influence Greek mythology had on Conan Doyle during the process of creation of his heroes. Indeed, both Holmes and Watson can be linked to mythological archetypes.

We will start with Holmes, whose mythological lineage is quite easy to trace: there is already something of the demigod in him in the way that he is gradually presented to the reader, in the first two chapters of *A Study in Scarlet*. We may remember that Watson is introduced to him through a mutual acquaintance, Stamford. Interestingly enough, when Stamford describes Holmes to Watson, he seems to have trouble finding the right words, and can only speak in apparent paradoxes: Holmes is not a medical student yet he is working at the laboratory, he is not easy to approach but “can be communicative enough when the fancy seizes him”, he studies a lot but is “desultory and eccentric” (5)... Seeing that Watson is increasingly perplexed by this seemingly absurd portrait, Stamford ends up justifying himself by resorting to a wonderful understatement: “It is not easy to express the inexpressible” (*ibid.*). We see that here, even before introducing Holmes in person in his narrative, Conan Doyle presents him as some sort of being outside of human understanding, one that cannot be explained not described, one that simply is too different and too unique to be rationally reduced to a handful of meaningful words. Stamford's last intervention in the chapter (and, for that matter, in the whole canon) challenges Watson to study his new-found room-mate, dubbing him “a knotty problem” and adding “I'll wager he learns more about you than you about him.” (both p.9)

After moving in with Holmes, Watson does face a very similar problem when, in

chapter two, he rises up to Stamford's challenge by attempting to divine what his room-mate's activities can be. Having already some sort of literary awareness, Watson is more organised than his former colleague in his investigation; he starts by describing Holmes's physical appearance:

“His very person and appearance were such as to strike the attention of the most casual observer. In height he was rather over six feet, and so excessively lean that he seemed to be considerably taller. His eyes were sharp and piercing, save during those intervals of torpor to which I have alluded; and his thin, *hawklike nose* gave his whole expression an air of alertness and decision. His chin, too, had the prominence and squareness which *marks the man of determination*. His hands were inevitably blotted with ink and stained with chemicals, yet he was possessed of extraordinary delicacy of touch, as I frequently had occasion to observe when I watched him manipulate his fragile philosophical instruments.” 10/11

It becomes apparent to the reader that Watson, like Stamford, lacks the proper words to describe Holmes in normal terms: the profusion of adverbs and the lexical field of the surprise indicate as much. Even physically speaking, Holmes is larger than life; he is as much (or as little) a man as an animal, as Watson only compares him once to both (see the passages in italics). Unable to draw a complete picture of Holmes, Watson has no choice but to focus on parts of the whole (Holmes's eyes, his nose, his hands).

Watson then attempts to make a list of Holmes's knowledge, in order to determine what his trade must be; we shall not analyse this list as it is very well-known and has been dealt with many times before. However, all we can say is that the result is a similar one: the list is apparently a series of paradoxes, and Watson is unable to make sense of his room-mate. In the course of chapter two, Watson eventually asks Holmes what his trade is, and here the answer is very interesting as well:

“I have a trade of my own. I suppose I am the only one in the world. I'm a consulting detective, if you can understand what that is. Here in London we have a lot of government detectives and lots of private ones. When these fellows are at fault, they come to me, and I manage to put them on the right scent. They lay all the evidence before me, and I am generally able, by the help of my knowledge of the history of crime, to set them straight.” 15

Here again, even when he himself is speaking, Holmes cannot be reduced to something that already exists: the only way he can explain to Watson what a “consulting detective” is, is by stating first what he is *not* (not a “government detective” and not a “private detective” either). Holmes is fundamentally other because he is fundamentally unique; in this, he is very much like any hero of the Greek mythology, whose overwhelming presence was explained through their divine parentage. The impossibility to reduce these heroes to a fixed identity

was conveyed, as one may recall, through the repeated use of hyperbolic periphrases, epithets and metaphors, as well as comparisons to non-human things (animals, natural disasters...); this is hardly the case in Conan Doyle however, because the codes of fiction writing have evolved since Homer's time. Holmes's quasi-divine nature is nonetheless repeatedly conjured up, mostly through the depiction of how 'normal' people (Watson, the police, the clients...) react to his seemingly absurd questions during the investigations, and Watson's descriptions of Holmes's several eccentricities; there are also, here and there, non-human comparisons (the most famous is probably the one used in *The Cardboard Box*, when Holmes is compared to a spider at the centre of its web, because Conan Doyle will use a similar metaphor to describe Moriarty in *The Final Problem*).⁴

But doesn't Holmes owe more to one Greek hero than to the others: Odysseus? Several details would indicate as much: Odysseus is known, even among his peers, for his ability to out-think his opponents and uses his wits more than any other quality to get himself out of tricky situations. Let us not forget that Odysseus is presented as a master of disguise at several moments in the legend that delights in fooling even his closest friends and advisors: we can recall, for example, his disguising himself when he returns to Ithaca and only revealing his true self gradually. Similarly, Holmes is known to use disguises in order to serve his best interests, even fooling Watson: in *The Empty House*, Holmes appears three times in different disguises before unmasking himself in front of his friend (who faints because of the emotion). When necessary, Odysseus is also a mighty warrior; Holmes himself is not only a brain without a body: we learn in *A Study in Scarlet* that he is an expert in singlestick combat and fencing (p.13) as well as a skilled marksman (even though he usually relies on Watson for that), and in *The Sign of the Four* he discusses his boxing techniques with the prizefighter-turned-bodyguard McMurdo (pp.133/134). Furthermore, Odysseus is often portrayed as a solitary hero, reluctant to join the Greek army in the Trojan War but key to the Greek victory in the end, much like Holmes baulks at mingling with the police but always sides with them in the end so that they can capture the culprit.

We may stretch this mythological reading even further, if we apply it this time to Watson. He, perhaps even more than his friend, is a character with a dual nature: both a man of action, taking his place at Holmes's side during the most dangerous situations (he is shot and wounded in *The Three Garridebs*) or even facing some threats on his own (we refer, obviously, to *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, but one can also think of the beginning of *The Man With the Twisted Lip* in which he goes alone to an opium den to retrieve a patient of his),

⁴ *The Carboard Box*, p.257; *The Final Problem*, p.423.

and the intelligence behind the tale, the only valid narrative perspective.⁵ If his active side stems more from the tradition of chivalry novels and their figure of the squire (even though Achilles had Patrocles), Watson can be linked, in terms of narrative power and role as a mouthpiece for the author, to a recurring character in Greek and Roman mythologies: the bard. This character is perhaps one of the earliest manifestations of a meta-literary awareness in Western culture, as he is a fictional character who sings the epic tales of the heroes he meets, thus making him an intermediary between them and the reader/ spectator (we must remember that, at least at Homer's time, epic poetry was sung and not written). There are many examples of this kind of narrative interference (the many embedded stories in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is perhaps the best known), but for the sake of our argumentation, let us go back to Homer's *Odyssey*.

When Odysseus is stranded alone on the island of the Phaeacians, he conceals his identity, even when invited to the king's banquet. Eventually, it is a bard, Demodocus, who makes him known to the court of the king, by singing tales of the Trojan War and especially the fall of the city thanks to Odysseus's ruse of the Trojan horse. The readers (spectators) who, up to that moment, did not know of that ruse (since it is not recorded in *The Iliad*, contrary to popular belief), find themselves very much in the same situations as Watson's reading public: as Watson makes clear in his introductions to several accounts, his purpose in writing about Holmes's adventures is to make his contribution to several affairs known to the public. We come back again to Holmes's quote from Horace at the end of *A Study in Scarlet*: without Watson's account, the extent of his contribution to the investigation would have remained a secret, only known to a few people directly involved in the case (i.e. the two police officers, the culprit and, of course, Watson himself). This spreading of the truth becomes very early on a topos in the canon; it is even made problematic eventually, since Holmes does not seem to yearn for public recognition, especially in his latter days (we will discuss later Holmes's and Watson's opposed points of view on the question).

b) Holmes and Watson, brave knights to the rescue of helpless women

The other major influence on Conan Doyle coming from popular literature is of course chivalry novels. We must not forget that Conan Doyle worshipped devoutly another Scotsman, Sir Walter Scott, and this devotion had an impact on him when he had to create

⁵ Despite a handful of attempts on Conan Doyle's part to change that ; we may think of the two stories narrated directly by Holmes (*The Blanched Soldier* and *The Lion's Mane*), the story-within-the-story in which Holmes tells Watson about one of his first cases (*The Gloria Scott*), Conan Doyle's endeavour at making a third-person narration (*The Mazarin Stone*) and *His Last Bow* in which, oddly enough, the narrator changes between the first and second halves of the story.

heroes himself. To speak only of morality and ethics, as we have done already, Holmes and Watson owe more to, let us say, Ivanhoe, than to any Greek hero. Indeed, many characters in Greek mythology (be they gods or demigods) are often presented as ruthless warriors, ruled by their lower instincts, very capable of cowardly acts or evil deeds; even Odysseus himself is not exempt of flaws: we may recall that, in one of the versions of the tale, he tried not to join the Greek armada sailing for Troy, by pretending to be insane in front of the Greek commanders. On the other hand, the heroes of chivalry novels always abide by a strict code of behaviour, rescuing the weak, protecting their liege lord, putting the needs of others before their own desires: in a well-known tale of the Round Table, Lancelot accepts to climb into an ox-driven cart (which represents the ultimate act of infamy for a knight) in order to save a damsel in distress.

Holmes's morality wavers more than that of his chivalrous precursors, and one might say that he takes the case mostly as a means to pass the time and to keep himself entertained; yet, he never refuses to help a client, be they an unlucky engineer, the king of Bohemia, a fear-driven young mistress or a seasoned police inspector, sometimes without compensation of any sort. Moreover, the extent of his work to clean the Victorian society of its most dangerous and threatening elements marks him as a true knight-errant, battling all the monsters he encounters and emerging victorious (at least most of the time).

We would like to dwell some more on the relationship between Holmes and women, around which many contrary things have been written. Even though he is often presented by modern critics as a hopeless misogynist, who refuses to marry and to whom love is an aberration, it would be unfair to judge the character solely on that basis.⁶ Women, in the holmesian canon, are often portrayed as damsels in distress, very much like the way they appeared in chivalry novels (with, of course, one momentous exception: Irene Adler); consequently, Holmes's job is akin to that of the knight: to save them from whatever peril awaits in the shadows. Then again, every client of Holmes's is helpless, whatever his gender may be; and the investigations in which Holmes helps women are often art for art's sake, since the detective seldom gets any reward at all from them. *The Sign of the Four*, once more, can be seen as the account that resembles the most or a chivalry novel, since it ends with the prospect of Watson's wedding to Mary Morstan and their life as a couple "happily ever after"; except that Conan Doyle would deceive the expectations of the reader by having Watson's wife die at some point in the canon (the chronology is unclear, as always with Conan Doyle,

⁶ His famous line, at the end of *The Sign of the Four*, when he learns that Watson is getting married to Mary Mortsan, is : « Love is an emotional thing, and whatever is emotional is opposed to that true, cold reason which I place above all things. I should never marry myself, lest I bias my judgement. »

and the event is not precisely chronicled; however, there is a moment when Watson moves back to Baker Street to live with Holmes for a couple of years, before apparently marrying again).

c) Conan Doyle and hero-worship

Aside of mythology and chivalry novels, a third source had a strong influence on Conan Doyle's writing, an influence that he acknowledges through the words of Watson as early as in *A Study in Scarlet*: the works of Thomas Carlyle, mainly his famous essay *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*. We have already discussed Carlyle's arguments on a previous occasion, but we should nonetheless summarize them here. We can start by saying that Carlyle is the British representative of a historiographical movement linked to Romanticism, that has been sometimes called heroic vitalism. As the name indicates, it reads history as a succession of great men -whom Carlyle calls "Heroes"- who, because they were inspired and ready to stand up for progress, changed their society for the better. In Carlyle's theory, the heroic status is inseparable from a divine inspiration, and the fact that there has been an evolution in the way society perceived its heroes is linked to the progressive rise of science and skepticism; that is why heroes "degenerated" from Gods to Prophets, to Poets, to Priests, to Men of Letters, to Kings, with a clear metaphysical loss. Carlyle's belief is also that heroes alone cannot do much; they have to reach out to the common folk and become leaders (going back to Carlyle's six categories of heroes, it is clear that what they have in common is their popular dimension).

If we stick purely to these few main ideas, Holmes and Watson seem to have absolutely nothing to do with Carlyle: Holmes is a scientist, who rejects everything that is not factual (so no metaphysics, no supernatural, no transcendence of any sort) and who refuses to mingle with the people he is hired to protect; Watson himself is hardly a religious zealot. Nonetheless, the way Carlyle blends historical reality with elements of fiction and mythology may remind us of the world in which Holmes and Watson live: a fictionalized vision of end-of-the-century Britain, a strange mixture of acute realism (in the geographical details, the descriptions of the buildings, of the cultural life of the period...) and fictional or mythical elements (the use of archetypical characters, a very traditional plotting that relies on recurring elements, the complete lack of chronology...). The way Holmes talks about his fictional rivals (Dupin and Lecoq) in *A Study in Scarlet* is particularly interesting in this respect: though Watson believes that they are fictional ("I had no idea that such individuals existed outside of stories" 16), Holmes does not seem to acknowledge any difference between their statuses and his own, criticizing them as if he knew them personally ("Now, in my opinion, Dupin was a very inferior fellow. That trick of his of breaking in on his friends' thoughts with an apropos remark after a quarter of an hour's silence is really very showy and superficial. He had some

analytical genius, no doubt; but he was in no means such a phenomenon as Poe appeared to imagine" *ibid*, and he makes a similar remark concerning Lecoq). One could also argue that the very nature of Watson's accounts is precisely what Carlyle places at the heart of his theory: hero-worship, more precisely here the worship of Sherlock Holmes as the most recent incarnation of the hero, the one that is best fit to battle the evils of a new era. Again, even though Holmes rejects Dupin and Lecoq's methods, the simple fact that they are mentioned implies a correlation, a tradition of heroism of which Holmes is the new representative.

There is one point of doctrine, however, on which Conan Doyle's opinion strongly differs from that of Carlyle: the question of science. Even though Carlyle is a strong believer in cultural progress, he laments the rise of science, which he links to industry and scepticism, because it turns man's mind away from God and encourages him to focus on the physical world rather than on spirituality, metaphysics and transcendence. They are, consequently, responsible for the lack of new heroes in the industrial society that is Britain in the 1840s (the time when Carlyle is writing), because the people no longer yearn for moral progress but for a purely economical one. What Conan Doyle stands for, as we have seen, is almost exactly the opposite: to him, and this is clear when one analyses his literary creations, the scientist is the true hero of the times. This does not mean that the only type of hero there is is the scientist (when Carlyle wrote that, in the temporal succession of events, heroism passed on from Poets to Priests, he did not mean that all poets became priests), but that the scientist is truly born out of the society of the turn of the century, and that he is the one, consequently, that will enable it to take the next step on the road to progress. The whole structure of the cases, in the holmesian canon, illustrates this idea: something has happened that society was not ready to deal with, and it has had a visible impact (the clients that come to Holmes are quite often in extreme states of anger, sadness, fear or confusion); Holmes investigates, using a rational and all-encompassing method; he heals the wound by going over the problem and explaining it in understandable terms; order is restored.

One may even go so far as to venture a meta-literary interpretation of Carlyle, that Conan Doyle would echo in the canon by having Holmes and Watson repeatedly discuss the roles and the rules and literature: insofar as he creates heroes to inspire society, but that these heroes are received and interpreted differently as time goes by and as the culture evolves, one could almost say that God, in Carlyle, is very much like an author. His work is both rooted in the culture and society of the time and open to endless re-interpretation by those who will come afterwards: this is what Carlyle means when he speaks of the evolution of the status of the hero. Holmes is aware of his status as a fictional character in Watson's words, which

makes it all the more important for him to discuss what Watson should do with the narrative; Watson, on the other hand, is mostly interested in reaching as many people as he can with the tales of Holmes's feats, even though he is often reflecting on his own status as an author.

Having traced the origins of Conan Doyle's best-known creations in the old-established literary tradition, we can now examine it in the closer context of contemporary popular literature. Indeed, if we are to analyse how and why 21st-century authors have rewritten Conan Doyle's detective duo, we must first understand how it fit into its original context.

3] The first of detectives? Conan Doyle's relation to precursors (Poe, Gaboriau):

As Katherine Wisser shows very well in her thesis on the conditions of publication of the holmesian canon, Conan Doyle owes a lot to at least three authors that were already well-known in the world of popular fiction: Robert Louis Stevenson, Edgar Allan Poe and Émile Gaboriau. If some of the first reviews of *A Study in Scarlet* were lukewarm (to say the least) and did not consider the book as something more than a timid attempt at replicating the works of these three authors, we must remember that Conan Doyle himself acknowledges what he owes his predecessors, both within the narrative of *A Study in Scarlet* (by having Watson compare Holmes to Chevalier Dupin and Inspector Lecoq in the second chapter of the novel) and in his memoirs. There is, however, a fundamental difference between the works of Poe or Gaboriau and Conan Doyle's creation, something that apparently was lost on the first reviewers; what we could call the “Conan Doyle touch” would afterwards be imitated and replicated, and its influence on the genre of detective fiction would eventually overshadow that of Poe and Gaboriau.

As he explains himself in his memoirs, Conan Doyle was greatly impressed by Poe and Gaboriau's characterization and plots but, as a true Victorian scientist, he could not accept the use they made of blind luck in their denouements: often, the detective would display quasi-superhuman powers of observation, yet the solution to the problem posed initially by the case would originate from a *deus ex machina* rather than from these powers of analysis. Conan Doyle wrote in his memoirs: “The great defect in the detective of fiction is that he obtains results without any obvious reason. That is not fair, it is not art” (Conan Doyle in interview, in Wisser, p.15). He was even more critical of this since he had himself trained to become a doctor under the guidance of one Joseph Bell, who was some sort of a deduction fanatic: the man was known to be able to tell many things of his patients (and, at times, diagnose their illnesses) simply by observing them closely, without them needing to utter a word.⁷ The idea,

⁷ Funnily enough, Joseph Bell was also a friend of R.L. Stevenson's, who recognized his influence on the character of Holmes when he read *A Study in Scarlet* and sent Conan Doyle a letter on that topic.

obviously, impressed Conan Doyle greatly; he henceforth decided that there would be no chance in Holmes's world, and that everything would obey the laws of logic and rationality. Consequently, the detective would have to understand these laws perfectly in order to solve the mystery.

However, in order to avoid resorting to chance altogether, Conan Doyle had to give his detective mental abilities that went beyond those already exhibited by Dupin and Lecoq. Taking up what Poe had dubbed “ratiocination”, Conan Doyle transformed it and turned it into a powerful rational tool that could account for anything and everything happening in the world: “the science of deduction” was born. It is no coincidence if both the second chapter of *A Study in Scarlet* and the first chapter of *The Sign of the Four* have that title: it assesses the central part Holmes' mind plays throughout the whole canon. Holmes' “science of deduction” is what sets him apart from other characters (even Moriarty) in his world, but also from his two predecessors in fiction. His very status as a “consulting detective” is interesting: he is no longer a dilettante (like Dupin) or a police officer (like Lecoq), he is *the* professional detective, in the sense that he is devoted body and soul to his art. His whole mind, that famously “rebels at stagnation” (*The Sign of the Four* 110) has been shaped for one purpose and one purpose only: to solve the most difficult problems it is presented with. Holmes, one might say, is the ultimate incarnation of utilitarianism: there is nothing for him outside of his work, as Watson points it out in the third chapter of *A Study in Scarlet* (“Sherlock Holmes's smallest actions were all dedicated towards some definite and practical end” p.26).⁸ One may recall Watson's amazement, prior to that, when he finds out that Holmes does not know that the Earth revolves around the Sun, and Holmes's subsequent answer:

“Now that I know it I shall do my best to forget it. [...] You see, I consider a man's brain originally like a little empty attic, and you have to stock it with such furniture as you choose. A fool takes in all the lumber of any sort that he comes across, so that the knowledge that might be useful to him gets crowded out, or at best is jumbled up with a lot of other things, so that he has a difficulty in laying his hands upon it. Now the skilled workman is very careful indeed as to what he takes into his brain-attic. He will have nothing but the tools which may help him in doing his work, but of these he has a large assortment, and all in the most perfect order.” 11/12

⁸ One might argue that Holmes has hobbies, like playing the violin, boxing or going to the opera ; this is true, but these hobbies are only there as part of a routine to pass the time. When on a case, Holmes is always either at the heart of the action or, at moments when reflection is needed, letting his brain work on the problem while his body is doing something else (in which case the violin is paramount). Knowing what we know now of the way the human brain works, it is very interesting to see that Conan Doyle was perfectly right in presenting a detective who knows the importance of leaving his brain to rest for a while by doing something entirely different from the problem he is working on, years before the popularization of Freud's theory of the unconscious.

Contrary to what most of the 21st-century readership believes, Conan Doyle was not the founder of detective fiction: he was, as we have shown, strongly inspired by three predecessors, Robert Louis Stevenson, Edgar Allan Poe and Emile Gaboriau. However, Conan Doyle really changed the rules of the game by creating a systematic and rational approach to investigations based on “the science of deduction” and refusing chance altogether. Thanks to that, Holmes became *the* modern detective, and detective fiction truly rose as a literary genre (whereas it was nothing more than a sub-genre of popular fiction before). The direct impact Conan Doyle had on his contemporaries is easy to measure, without even needing to check the sales of *The Strand Magazine* when it published Holmes's adventures: one needs only to read the first short stories written by Agatha Christie featuring Hercule Poirot (*The Affair at the Victory Ball*, for example, is hardly more than plagiarism), or remember Arsène Lupin's long-time adversary Herlock Sholmès. We could therefore side with Katherine Wisser when she nicknames Conan Doyle “the dean of detective fiction” (Wisser 33). Let us continue analysing the specificities of Conan Doyle's tales, focusing on how he turned Holmes and Watson into the icons they are today.

B) New icons for a new century

1] The fictionalization of industrial England: an organized cosmos with “science” at its heart

Following the tradition of popular fiction in the Victorian era, before the rise of science-fiction and heroic fantasy, the fictional universe in which the adventures of Holmes and Watson take place is very similar to the real contemporary world, with a time gap of only a few years between the time when the events are supposed to have taken place and the time of the publication of W's account.⁹ Even that temporal delay is cleverly explained by Conan Doyle in fictional terms: after writing the original account in his journal, Watson has to select which case would be more interesting to read for the public, then re-write it in a form suitable for publishing (not to mention other causes for delay: in *The Adventure of the Speckled Band*, Watson explicitly mentions in his introduction that the release of the account has been postponed by the client's express wishes for it not to be published before her death, probably because she feared it would damage her family's reputation). One of the chief imperatives in Conan Doyle's work therefore seems to be verisimilitude: one good example here is his response to the debate sparked by the publication of *The Adventure of the Priory School*, where Holmes deduces the way a character went by looking at the traces left by his bicycle on

⁹ The only exception to this trend, and it is a strong one, is obviously the historical romance.

the muddy ground. Many readers assured Conan Doyle that, while one could easily follow traces in the mud, it was not possible to tell if the traces were left by going or coming back. Conan Doyle decided to verify that himself and ultimately agreed that his contenders were right.¹⁰

There are of course many other proofs, throughout the canon, of Conan Doyle's attachment to verisimilitude: anyone who reads can't fail to notice that the stories are filled with realistic details on what it was like to live in London for a middle-class person in Victorian times. Holmes and Watson frequently go to the theatre or the opera, and often mention the title of the plays they attend; Mycroft is to be found at his gentlemen's club -a very peculiar sort of club, however, since it only attracts "the most unsociable and unclubbable men in town" (*The Greek Interpreter* 380); the streets of the metropolis are crowded with hansom, policemen, street urchins. A good example of social analysis can be found in *A Scandal in Bohemia*, in which Conan Doyle provides the reader with an interesting insight into a lady's house in London when Holmes goes undercover (first as a groom, then as a clergyman) in Irene Adler's house, in order to recover some compromising documents. The incursions of Holmes into the countryside are similarly well-documented, with an importance given to the means of transportations (train, hansom, bicycle, horse) and to the landscapes and architecture: in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, for example, the landscape is extremely important in the narrative, even more so as Watson's deeply subjective descriptions of the manor or the moors give the novel its distinctly Gothic atmosphere. This attention to detail is without a doubt one of the reasons for the readers' positive response to Conan Doyle's tales, as they depict a contemporary world, that they can imagine without any trouble because it is part of their everyday life.

Can we call it a "realistic" depiction of industrial England, though? If we compare Conan Doyle's narratives to one of his predecessors, Émile Zola, the answer would be negative: in Zola's investigations, the criminal affair is always more or less a pretext, and the real focus of the novel is on the people's reactions to crime, the description of the difficult conditions of life in the lower classes, and the enactment of social tensions (very much in the tradition of French realism and naturalism, represented by Zola, Maupassant or Balzac). In Conan Doyle, however, it is very much the reverse: like Holmes, who only sees and takes into account what is useful for his investigation, all the realistic details only serve Conan Doyle's narrative, but the main focus is on the plot and the characters, not on the background.

¹⁰ This anecdote was originally related by Conan Doyle himself in an article he wrote for *The Strand Magazine*, entitled "Some Personalities About Sherlock Holmes." The article can be found online.

Furthermore, a handful of exceptions aside (the most notable being the Baker Street Irregulars, a gang of street urchins Holmes employs to get information), most of the characters in the canon belong to the middle-class or upper middle-class, and Conan Doyle has no interest in showing the social struggles taking place at that time. Similarly, female characters are very marginal, and the debates over their role in society is never once alluded to.¹¹

Conan Doyle's purpose in writing the canon is entirely different from that of Gaboriau: he wants to rejuvenate popular literature by bringing in new topics, new heroes, new interrogations, but all the while staying true to the tradition. In this respect, the Holmes stories work very much like fables or myths, that take place in a fictionalized world, that is described as a rationally organized and understandable cosmos. The use of the word “cosmos” here may seem at odds with Conan Doyle's very rational and realistic conception of his fictional universe, but when one takes a closer look, one realises that Holmes's world is far from being realistic and rational. Indeed, by refusing the possibility of chance altogether, and by creating a world in which every phenomenon, every action, every detail can be fully understood and explained (given the proper amount of time and reflection) through the same rational deductive process, Conan Doyle cut Holmes and Watson off from realism and truly placed them at the heart of a perfectly organised universe, the order of which Holmes is the warden. Of course, fate and the gods are absent from this cosmos, because it is a Victorian cosmos, but they are replaced with by probability, rationality, and the laws of cause and effect; in other words, the dream of every scientist of the period.

The difficulty, in analysing the world of Holmes and Watson, is to always keep in mind the essential difference between what it appears to be and what it really is. Conan Doyle's constant preoccupation with verisimilitude, his refusal of chance as a plot device, his choice of a scientist as a hero must not hide the fact that science and rationality, in this fictional world, are nothing more than narrative caricatures of what they are in real life, and that the world of Sherlock Holmes is a Victorian scientific utopia made of mythological elements. Let us turn our attention to the very first time Watson is confronted to what the detective calls “the science of deduction”, in the second chapter of *A Study in Scarlet*: Holmes has written an article with a distinctly biblical title, “The Book of Life”, and Watson is reading it with increasing perplexity. The first lines run like this:

¹¹ The character of Irene Adler, for example, has been mistakenly presented as a proto-feminist only because she is said to be the only one to beat Holmes at his own game. First of all, this is wrong, because at least one other antagonist has beaten Holmes (Charles Augustus Milverton, in the eponymous case); then, her battle of wits with Holmes ends with her eloping blissfully with the man she loves, and she is never heard of again. In other words, her sole concern is marital happiness, hardly what the suffragettes advocated...

“From a drop of water [said the writer]; a logician could infer the possibility of an Atlantic or Niagara without having seen or heard of one or the other. So all life is a great chain, the nature of which is known wherever we are shown a single link of it. Like all other arts, the Science of Deduction and Analysis is one which can only be acquired by long and patient study, nor is life enough to allow any mortal to attain the highest possible perfection in it.”¹⁴

This passage has a definite religious ring to it, rather than scientific: if anything, causality here seems to work exactly like fate in Greek mythology, both as an inescapable force binding anyone to their origins and as a prism through which the future actions of that character can be predicted, because the repetition of patterns across generations is at the heart of fate. This idea of the endless repetition of crimes is also one of Holmes's key principles for the science of deduction, which he expresses for the first time in the third chapter of *A Study in Scarlet* in a manner that directly echoes the Bible (Ecclesiastes 1:9): “There is nothing new under the sun. It has all been done before” (p. 23, but he repeats it on many other occasions in the canon).¹² As we have already argued elsewhere, Holmes, rather than staying true to a scientific method based on observation, hypothesis and experimentation (such as the one established by Claude Bernard in 1865), acts very much like a prophet: he reveals the truth, the essence of what is real though his *logos*, even if at first what he says seems absurd or unbelievable to other non-enlightened characters. Holmes describes reality in a mock-scientific way, and reality adapts to his description, always proving him right. Quasi-genetic predestination, repetition of criminal behaviours and acts, all this reminds us very much of one of literature's favourite pseudo-sciences in the 19th century, which Conan Doyle uses regularly in his descriptions: phrenology. It was bound to be in Holmes's mental toolbox, as it rests on the belief that one can read the full range of another man's character (and even some details of his past) simply by looking at the shape of his skull. There are numerous examples of this in the canon, as both Holmes and Watson resort to it, as we have already seen (remember, for example, Watson's remark in his first description of Holmes about the shapes of his chin and his nose that we have quoted).

One must, however, recall that the scientific context of the end of the 19th century was very different indeed from what it is nowadays: science was seen by many to be the tool that would enable man to fully understand the universe he lived in (much like religion had been before). As Steven Marcus phrases it, in the first chapter of his book *The Other Victorians*,

¹² We will come back to that idea of patterns and repetitions in our study of the adaptations in chapter three, as it is key in understanding the way Caleb Carr's *The Italian Secretary* (even more than the other two) is constructed.

scientific knowledge was a fantasy: “[Scientific thinking in the Victorian era], one soon learns, rests upon a mass of unargued, unexamined and largely unconscious assumptions; its logical proceedings are loose and associative rather than rigorous and sequential; and one of its chief impulses is to confirm what is already been held as belief rather than to adapt belief to a new and probably disturbing knowledge” (1). In other words, according to Marcus, Conan Doyle's pseudo-science and mock-realism were nothing more than yet another emanation of the *Zeitgeist*, and Holmes, whose mission is to bring what is apparently unexplainable back into the field of knowledge, is the perfect incarnation of that. The notion that every event, every odd behaviour can be rationally accounted for is a reassuring notion in changing times: as mysterious, incomprehensible and threatening as the present might appear, Sherlock Holmes can always explain it rationally, and Watson can always deliver Holmes's conclusions to the readers, and the denouement is therefore almost always a happy one.

In other words, the basis for Conan Doyle's tales is a fantasized vision of contemporary England, in which every possible threat to moral and social health of the country is thwarted by the two heroes, both defenders and paragons of Britishness. The moral side of the characters should not be forgotten here: we have already seen that Conan Doyle was concerned with the improvement of the middle class; like many writers at the time, his tales are also pervaded by a fear of degeneration and a desire to keep Britain great (no pun intended). The holmesian canon, being concerned with questions of identity, of secrecy, of Sameness versus Otherness, is also very often the expression of an imperialist sentiment on Conan Doyle's -and Watson's- parts. If the Other is not always the criminal, he is always potentially a threat, because he brings disharmony and disunity among what was one. Happily, Holmes is the incarnation of the 19th-century fantasy of science, and is thus able to give a reassuring and understandable answer to every single question that is asked to him. In this respect, it may not be entirely a coincidence that he managed to thwart even death itself...

2] Turning Holmes and Watson into icons

a) Who is the true hero?

Now, Holmes and Watson may very well be in harmony with the *Zeitgeist* and inspired by a long literary tradition, but that does not fully explain the overwhelming success they were met with when the first short stories were published in *The Strand Magazine* in June 1891, nor their ongoing popularity in literature (not to mention cinema, illustration, and so on). We must consequently examine how Conan Doyle turned them into the icons they represent today. The main idea was, of course, to make the two characters stand out, to set

them apart from their literary origins. In order to do so, Conan Doyle used a similar technique to what he did to separate his idea of the detective fiction from what the genre was before: to introduce a shift in the paradigm. Here, the difference concerned the very notion of heroism.

What is a hero? According to Vincent Jouve's article "L'héroïsation, effet de texte ou de contexte?" there are several parameters which enable the reader to tell who the hero is, in a text; as Jouve argues, in more traditional forms of popular literature, these parameters usually converge in one character. On first thought, any reader would say that the hero, in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, is obviously Sherlock Holmes; however, as we will see, this is not exactly the case. Quoting Philippe Hamon's *Texte et idéologie*, Jouve starts with three different approaches to the hero: an ideological one, a structural one and an affective one. The ideological approach means that the hero is whichever character that incarnates the most the author's ideology, the values he is defending through the text. The structural approach means that the hero is whichever character that is the most present in the novel, the one that truly "organizes the internal space of the book" (63).¹³ The affective approach means that the hero is whichever character the reader identifies with the most. Immediately, Jouve argues that these three approaches very often contradict each other, giving the example of Anna Karenina: she is the hero according to the structural and affective approaches, but she is completely opposed to the ideology of the text. According to Jouve, in fact, there is a hierarchy in the three approaches in terms of effect on the reader because they do not use the same narrative devices, with the structural approach being always the strongest, because it relies only on the mechanics of the text, without any reference to its context of reading (this is why we identify with Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, whereas "in the real world, such a character would not necessarily attract sympathy" 64/65).¹⁴ This is also why the reader immediately identifies with a character that is presented as newcomer (for example Étienne Lantier in Zola's *Germinal*): both character and reader discover the universe of the text at the same time, and in the best case scenario the character's reactions echo those of the reader. Then comes the affective approach -which is also, to some extent, a question of mechanics: the character with which the reader sympathizes is the one whose intimate thoughts and feelings are laid bare by the text, and who, therefore, becomes fully understandable and knowable. Finally, and Jouve restricts this to texts that are chronologically close to us, the ideological approach may be important, but its importance is essentially restricted because it relies on a context rather than on the text. The rules of the genre to which the book belongs may add another set of

¹³ Full quote in French: "le héros est celui qui organise l'espace interne de l'oeuvre" This translation, like all those that will follow, is personal.

¹⁴ "Dans la vie réelle, un tel personnage ne nous serait pas forcément sympathique."

parameters, as characterization and identification will not work similarly in Gothic literature and in historical romance.

Let us try and apply this method to Conan Doyle's creation. On the structural level, we already encounter a problem: it is true that Holmes is the character whose name is present in the titles of all the collections of stories (except for *His Last Bow*, but then again, the reader knows immediately whose "last bow" the collection is about), and that, narratively speaking, he is the one that is the most present, the character that ultimately "organizes the internal space of the book" by categorizing them into archetypes (victim, friend, adversary) and the centre of all narrative tension, but he is by no means the character the text makes us identify with. That character is of course Watson. In this respect, the first two chapters of *A Study in Scarlet* are, once more, decisive, since they present us with all the narrative tricks used by an author to force character identification: a first-person narrative with internal focalisation, a character that is taking a new start in life (with, therefore, a new, "innocent" perspective), a direct and unlimited access to that character's thoughts and feelings (nearly two thirds of the first two chapters are composed of Watson's reflections on various subjects, from his past life to the queerness of his new room-mate), and the fascinated interrogations of that character for a mystery (in that case, the nature of Holmes's work) that are shared by the reader.

On an affective level, the results are even more striking: no reader can possibly identify with Holmes. The detective remains, throughout the whole canon, a mystery for the reader and for Watson himself: one may remember, for example, how little is known about his life before Baker Street or about his family (save that he is related to the real-life French painter Horace Vernet, and that he has an elder brother -which comes as a shocking revelation, since he only mentions his existence offhandedly after several years of living with Watson).¹⁵ Even on an emotional and psychological level, Conan Doyle does everything in his power to prevent empathy: Holmes is, essentially, inhuman, in the sense that he does not have feelings -or, rather, he does not seem to *display* any sign of normal feelings like love, hatred, jealousy, concern, etc.¹⁶ To Holmes, everything is but a game, and people are merely data or puzzles left for him to crack. This, again, is very paradoxical: there are times when he seems quite

¹⁵ Mycroft Holmes makes his first appearance in *The Greek Interpreter*, the twenty-fourth case of the canon, and is only present in three others (in the diptych *The Final Problem/ The Empty House* and in *The Bruce-Partington Plans*).

¹⁶ We must nuance that last affirmation: there is one occasion in the canon when Holmes truly shows that he cares for Watson, and that is when Watson receives a bullet wound in the course of an investigation in *The Three Garridebs*. However, Watson himself acknowledges that this burst of emotions is a one-time occurrence on his friend's part: "It was worth a wound—it was worth many wounds—to know the depth of loyalty and love which lay behind that cold mask. The clear, hard eyes were dimmed for a moment, and the firm lips were shaking. For the one and only time I caught a glimpse of a great heart as well as of a great brain. All my years of humble but single-minded service culminated in that moment of revelation." p.888

unable of sympathizing with anyone's situation or of taking into account their feelings, as he himself tells Watson in the first chapter of *The Sign of the Four* ("My dear doctor,' said he, kindly, 'pray accept my apologies. Viewing the matter as an abstract problem, I had forgotten how personal and painful a thing might be to you.'" p.114).¹⁷ On the contrary, there are times when he does not disclose his results to the police because he sympathises with the situation of the criminals, or because he knows that the judiciary system would do more harm than good in that case (we may recall the cases of *The Boscombe Valley Mystery*, *The Man with the Twisted Lip*, or *The Veiled Lodger*, among others). However, if the reader finds it impossible to identify with Holmes, one could argue that Holmes is in the same situation vis-a-vis his fellow humans, even Watson: there are several occasions, some of which we have already mentioned, when he is socially impaired by his cold detachment he usually takes pride in. In fact, the moment when Holmes truly opens himself up to the reader is, rather paradoxically, one of those when he seems the less sympathetic: the end of *The Sign of the Four*. One may remember that, when Watson announces his intention to get married, Holmes does not (in fact, he "can" not) congratulate him; to explain why, he simply says: "Love is an emotional thing, and whatever is emotional is opposed to that true, cold reason which I place above all things. I should never marry myself, lest I bias my judgement" (204). This sentence, it seems, is the key to understand the character and, perhaps, begin, to see things from his perspective: as the incarnation of self-centred utilitarianism, Holmes lives only for his work; consequently, when faced with the choice between feeling and thinking, he always chooses the latter, because he firmly believes that the two are opposed. But it is nonetheless a choice, that he has to make time and again, and we must remember that, as it explains his occasional manifestations of empathy.

The ideological approach must be mentioned, although Jouve gives it little consideration when the text is not chronologically close to the reader, which seems to be the case here, as our society and literature are quite different from that of the Victorians.¹⁸ It needs to be addressed nonetheless because, even for Conan Doyle's contemporaries, the question of ideological identification was not easy to answer when reading the canon. Holmes is, as we have already mentioned when discussing Carlyle's influence on Conan Doyle, the Hero of the

¹⁷ The context, as we remember, is Watson giving Holmes his brother's pocket watch, to put Holmes's abilities to a "severe test" (113). Of course, Holmes deduces everything he can from the trinket, even that Watson's brother was an alcoholic, and is, as often, rather careless in his formulation.

¹⁸ The question of whether or not we have truly managed to overcome the importance of the Victorian legacy is going to be addressed in our third part, especially with Caleb Carr's *The Italian Secretary*, a book that puts at its core a society's relationship to its past.

times, an *Übermensch* that should be fit to lead society further on the road to progress.¹⁹ Holmes's mission could be thought of, essentially, as a constant service done to the greater good by getting rid of all the elements that threaten the social, economical and political order in place at the turn of the century. That mission may be explicit, as in cases like *The Second Stain*, *The Greek Interpreter* or *Charles Augustus Milverton* (among others), in which Holmes faces the threats of espionage, organised international crime and blackmail; or it may be more explicit, as in the majority of the investigations. The very structure of the mission, however, never varies: there is a problem that a client cannot cope with because it seems beyond his sphere of understanding and action, then Holmes intervenes and solves it, and the client can return to his rightful place in society (Holmes's action could be compared to that of a doctor, not only because he was inspired by one: his aim is to restore the client to a healthy state, both mentally and sometimes physically).²⁰ His services, though largely unknown to the public, are regularly praised and rewarded by figures of authority and of the establishment (high-ranked police officers, ministers, foreign potentates, and even the royal family). Paradoxically, Holmes himself is far from embodying the Victorian ideal of a gentleman. As we have already seen, he is extremely self-centred, and takes cases only because they amuse him or present a challenge; Watson remarks several times throughout the canon that he might have been a criminal if he had found it a more interesting career. His social skills seem to vary from one case to the other, but even though he is very polite and gentlemanly (especially with women), he can be rude and extremely disdainful towards anyone who annoys him in any way, even Watson sometimes. His frequent rants against the inefficiency of the official police force, and his oppositions to the judiciary system, once in a while, show a contempt for any authority that would clash with his moral principles or his superior intellect. Worse, he is prone to fits of apathy and bad moods, during which he hardly moves and talks for several days (“now and again a reaction would seize him, and for days on end he would life upon the sofa in the sitting-room, hardly uttering a word or moving a muscle from morning to night.” *A Study in Scarlet* 10); he is also addicted to at least two different drugs which he uses alternatively when he is bored, cocaine and morphine. It is no wonder that Conan Doyle had Holmes's family line

¹⁹ On some points of doctrine, there is a striking similarity between Carlyle's Hero and Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, and one could argue that Holmes is a bit of both. However, since we have already elaborated on that topic on a previous occasion, we will not discuss it further here.

²⁰ One of the cases that illustrates the best this medical metaphor is, of course, *The Engineer's Thumb*: an engineer has found himself trapped in a situation he did not understand, by people whose motivations he did not understand, and barely escapes with his life but with his thumb cut off; thanks to Holmes, however, everything will be explained, and the story even ends on the engineer's thumb being put back in its original place with the help of surgery. A very good analysis of this case, borrowing heavily from Freudian psychoanalysis, can be found in Nathalie Jaëck's book *Les Aventures de Sherlock Holmes: une affaire d'identité*.

trace back to France, and not Britain: he is way too eccentric, too ironical and, perhaps, too subversive to be truly Victorian. Watson, on the other hand, is the perfect Victorian gentleman: a former soldier, a patriot, a doctor, and a family man to top it all; again, he is the one who 19th-century readers were supposed to identify with. The sentence that summarizes best Watson's character is in fact uttered by Holmes in their very last adventure together (chronologically), *His Last Bow*: in an ominous speech referring to a great disaster dawning upon Europe (the first world war), the detective is given solace by the unchanging, ever-loyal nature of his friend, whom he calls “the one fixed point in a changing age.”²¹

Consequently, if we only follow Jouve's analysis of heroism, the true hero of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* is not Holmes, but Watson. This apparent paradox is too momentous to be ignored; to put things back into perspective, it may be necessary to remember that Conan Doyle was heavily inspired by mythology and chivalry novels. Clearly, even at the time of “publication” (we put the term between brackets, as most of these tales were first known through the oral tradition), the large majority of the audience could not possibly identify with the heroes, for the simple reason that these heroes were more than human (it was explicit in Greek mythology, as most of the heroes were demigods, but it is also the case in chivalry novels): they possessed superhuman physical skills and, morally, they were almost irreproachable; moreover, the situations they faced were by no means realistic. They embodied an ideal of moral and physical perfection that was meant to inspire the readers, an ideal all the more perceptible when it clashed with the heroes' lower human instincts (Odysseus's love for his wife opposed to his several lovers on the way back home, Lancelot's pure-heartedness and strong moral code opposed to his adulterous affair with Guinevere, etc). In this respect, Holmes fits exactly the description: the ideology he incarnates is the Victorian ideal of moral and scientific progress hand in hand as he constantly strives for rational answers to all the questions he is faced with, and refuses to let belief or feeling cloud his judgement; but his human side manifests itself in the defects we have just alluded to. In a way, this explains Holmes's lasting popularity in the 20th and 21st centuries, even though we no longer share Conan Doyle's naive and overwhelming enthusiasm for science: as Umberto Eco writes in one of his essays (published in the collection *De Superman au surhomme*) Holmes is, like the medieval knights and Greek demigods, one of the ancestors of the modern superhero, a being essentially torn between powers that are beyond his comprehension and a very human nature, always trying to transcend his mortality by achieving feats in the general

²¹ *His Last Bow* was written in 1916/17, but the story is set in August 1914. The quotation can be found on p.808.

interest of society.

As we have said, the character the reader is supposed to identify with is Watson: this identification is achieved through Watson's constant narrative presence, as the reader shares his thoughts, feelings and doubts at the different stages of the investigation. The two most striking examples are perhaps to be found in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and *The Dying Detective*, for two different reasons. In *The Hound of the Baskervilles* Watson is left to investigate on his own, with scarcely any instructions from Holmes, for the first two thirds of the novel; the reader discovers the landscape, the people, the atmosphere solely through Watson's perception, without any interference from Holmes (who usually comments on what is important, or defuses the possible tension with irony and leaps from one subject to another). Going back to Jouve again, this is a perfect example of structural identification between reader and narrator: we identify with Watson because he is the only voice we hear through the text, but also because we share his puzzlement and his lack of understanding of what is going on (and, like him, we wonder when Holmes is going to show up and finally explain all the bizarre events that are happening in Baskerville Hall). In *The Dying Detective*, the structural identification is similar, but the dimension of empathy (or affective identification) for Watson's situation is even stronger: the narrative starts with Mrs Hudson calling for Watson in a state of panic, as Holmes is delirious and apparently dying of an unknown illness. In this short story, which is probably one of the most disturbing of the canon, the reader can really feel Watson's helplessness and frustration throughout, and ultimately his relief as Holmes reveals the whole thing was but an elaborate ruse to lure a criminal into a trap.

b) Holmes and Watson as visual icons:

We should add to this analysis that the several illustrators that have given life to Holmes and Watson seem to have understood the characters perfectly, and to have done everything in their power to translate this understanding into images. This meant two things: Holmes had to stand out, and Watson had to blend in. Both effects were achieved by altering or completing the descriptions given by Conan Doyle. Holmes's infamous deerstalker hat and Inverness cape, for example, set him apart from other characters' more plain-looking clothes; both were imagined by Sidney Paget and appear for the first time in the first illustration for *The Boscombe Valley Mystery* (published as early as October 1891). But Paget's most notable achievement is probably having managed to capture the essence of Holmes's attitude to life: when one looks at all the illustrations of the canon, one cannot fail to notice that many feature Holmes seated alone, legs crossed, as if in deep thought, very often with a faint smile on his

lips (fig. I to IV).

This calm demeanour and, most of all, this ironical smile contrast with the attitude of other characters: the clients, who always display the most graphic signs of anger, helplessness, despair or sadness; the policemen, who usually appear very stern and focused on their tasks; the criminals, always represented in the midst of a violent act, with a Machiavellian look on their faces when they think they have trapped Holmes, or full of ire when they have been caught; and Watson himself, whose face is usually a mirror of the expressions of the other characters present in the illustration. By putting that smile on Holmes's lips, Paget seems to show that Holmes is never taken aback, never surprised, and always fully in control. Interestingly enough, Paget chose to represent an active Holmes in quite a few other illustrations; in these cases Holmes is not smiling, but entirely focused on the action, with very striking poses (fig. V to VII).

This dual approach that shows Holmes both as a brain and as a man of action was not shared by all the illustrators of the canon, however. We will go over all the major illustrators of the canon later in this chapter, but for now let us focus on the illustrations made by Frederic Dorr Steele for the American publication of the canon in *Collier's Weekly*. Aside from the use of colours, the most striking difference is that Steele's illustrations focus solely on Holmes, and are always arranged in more or less the same way: Holmes standing alone in a room, deep in thought, often holding in his hand a clue directly taken from the story (fig. VIII to X).

These illustrations have a very different effect on the reader, and stem from a very different interpretation of the canon: exit Watson and all the other characters, the stories are about Holmes's constant intellectual battle with the mysterious and the unknown. Indeed, one might argue that whereas Paget represented Watson's retrospective point of view on the case, with his illustrations looking very much like dramatic tableaux, snapshots of one particularly important moment, Steele's work told the tale from Holmes's point of view, solely focusing on what the detective deemed important (*i.e.* the detective himself, the clue as a metonymy for the whole case, and the deductive process represented by Holmes's intense concentration). In terms of narrative power, Steele's illustrations are perhaps less original and dramatic than Paget's, but they are nonetheless extremely effective, probably because of their apparent simplicity.

Turning Holmes and Watson into icons was a task that required method, and we see now that Conan Doyle (and his illustrators) used a wide variety of techniques to turn his characters into full-fledged heroes. The author's constant play with different narrative traditions, some

very old and some quite recent, have paid off: Holmes and Watson are now, more than Dupin or Lecoq, the first heroic detectives in Western literature. We will continue to explore Conan Doyle's narrative experimentations to try and understand the impact he had on popular literature in general, and detective fiction in particular.

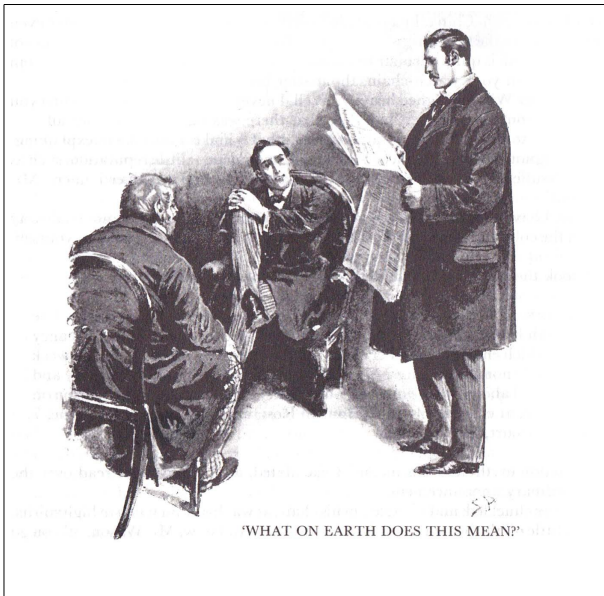


Fig. I: *The Red-Headed League*, 32

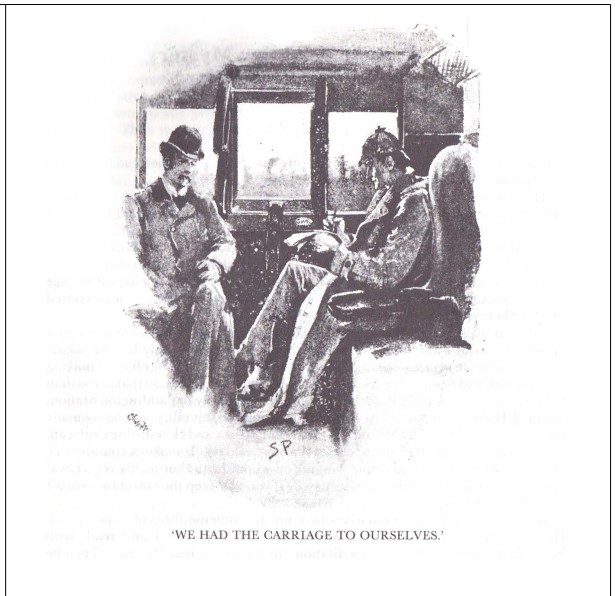


Fig. II: *The Boscombe Valley Mystery*, 66

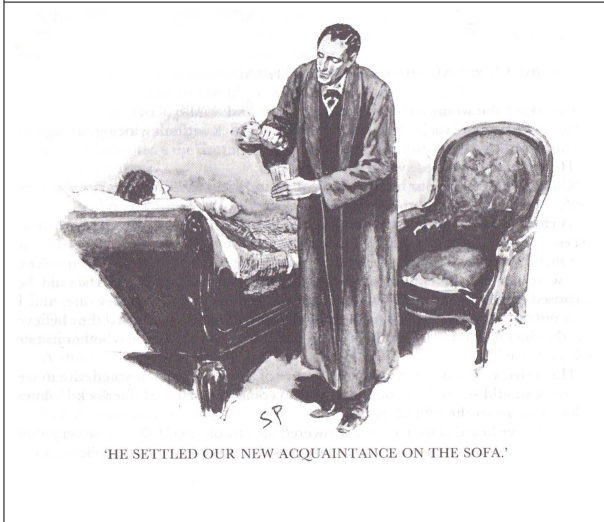


Fig. III: *The Engineer's Thumb*, 160

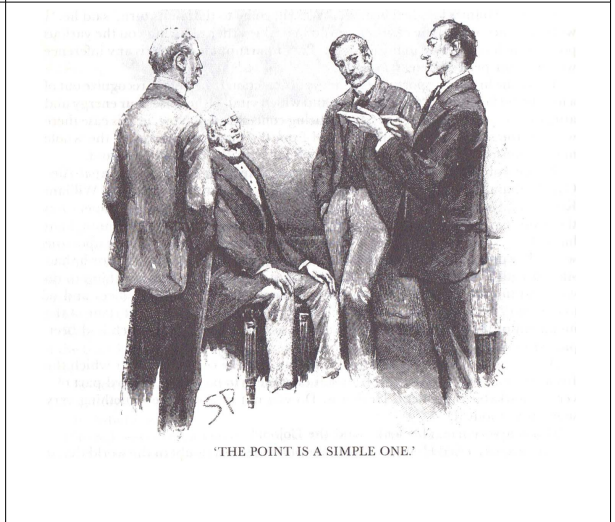


Fig. IV: *The Reigate Squire*, 346

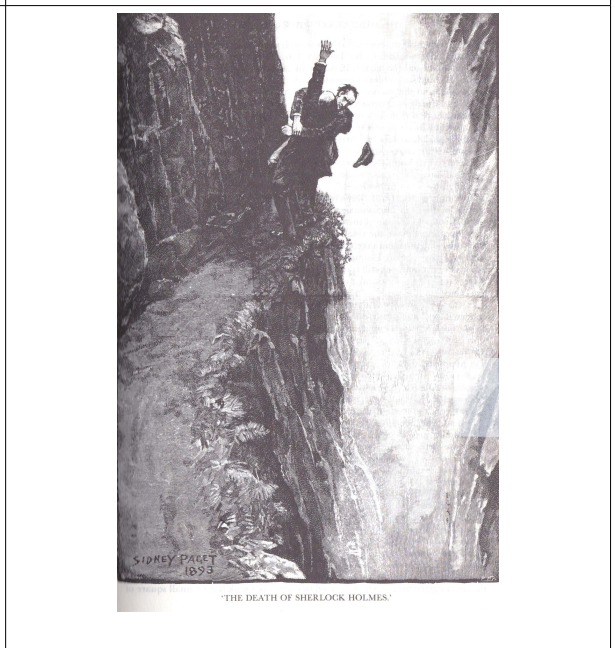
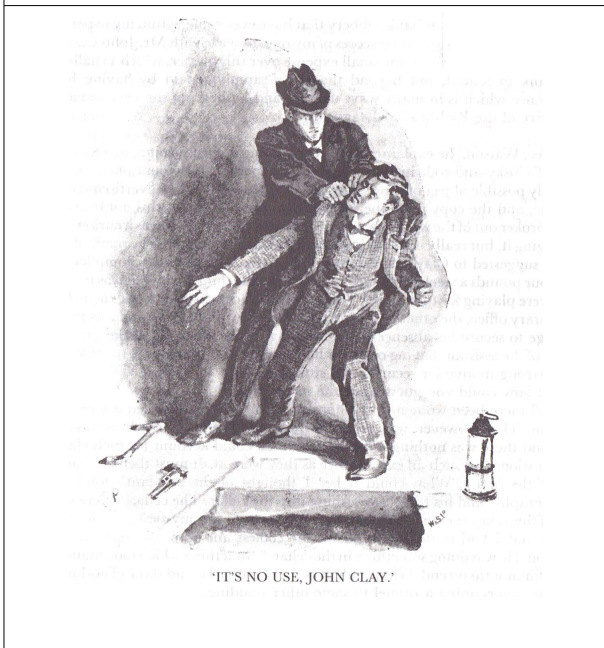
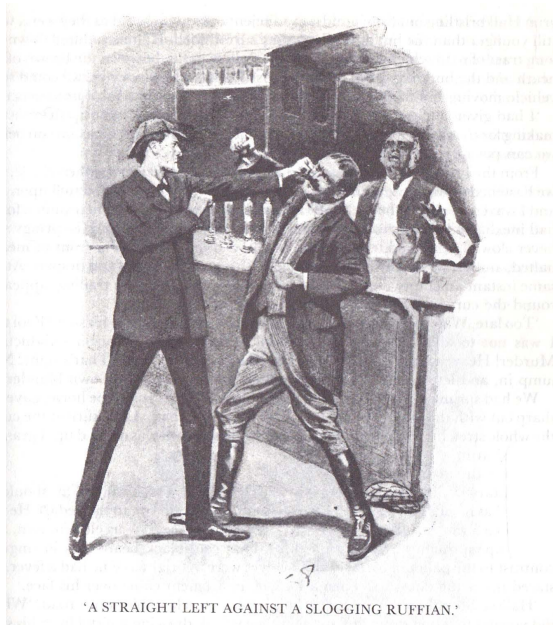


Fig. V: *The Red-Headed League*, 47



'A STRAIGHT LEFT AGAINST A SLOGGING RUFFIAN.'

Fig. VI: *The Final Problem*, 433

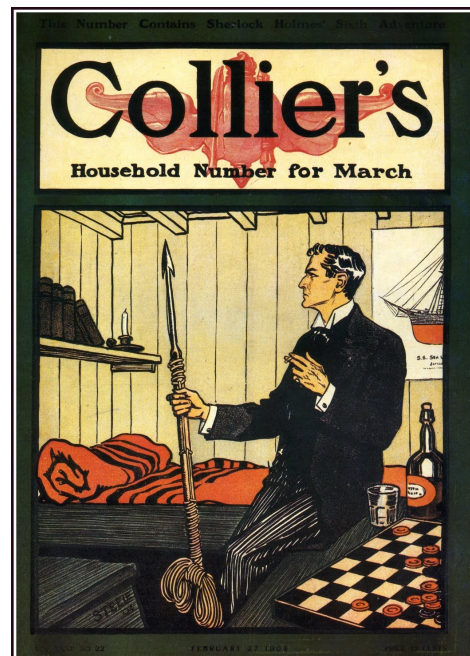


Fig. VII: *The Solitary Cyclist*, 505

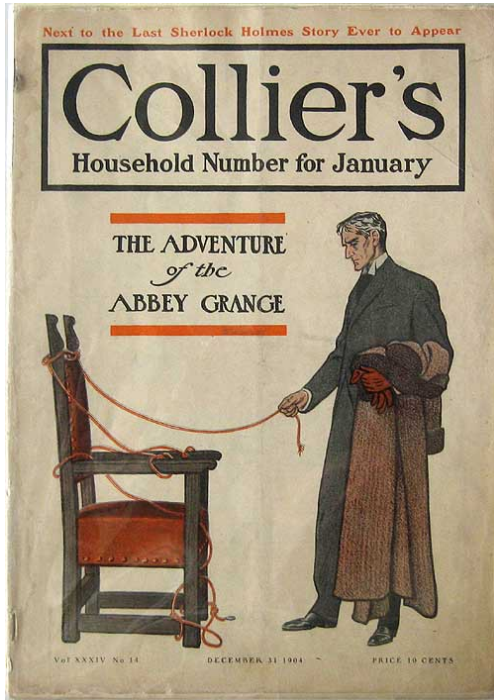


Fig. IX: *The Abbey Grange* (cover)

Fig. VIII: *Black Peter* (cover)

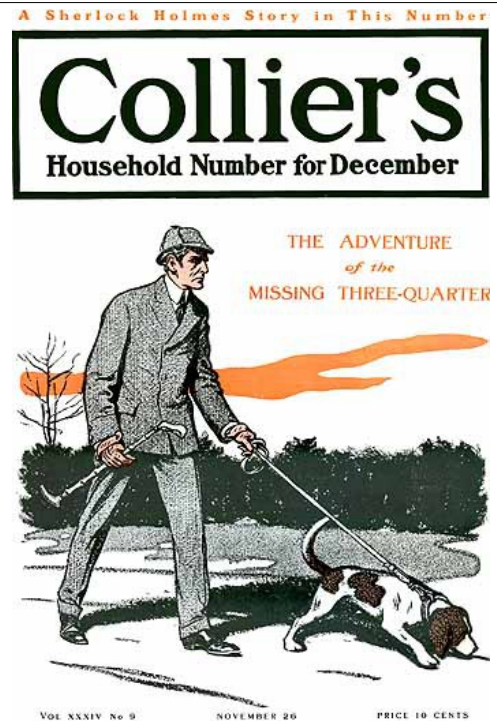


Fig. X: *The Missing Three-Quarters* (cover)

NB: Frederic Dorr Steele's illustrations can be found online on Tumblr and Google images. We have not been able to find enough information about who owned these images to

put them in the bibliography, and we apologize for it.

3] Making room for Holmes: a history of narrative experimentations

a) How to toy with the readers' expectations:

When he started writing the canon, Conan Doyle had hardly published anything. Moreover, the number of publications in the vast genres of sensational literature and popular fiction was so high that it was extremely difficult for a new author with no relations and a full-time job to make a name for himself. How Conan Doyle managed to do it is, as we will now see, through a constant narrative research and experimentation that characterized his writing up to the very end. As we have seen, his detective fiction is a blending of influences, from the classics to contemporary adventure novels; yet, in order to really leave his mark on the public, it was necessary for him to regularly come up with new ideas. One of his first and most important contributions, which is quite often forgotten today, is the format of the stories: he was, in fact, the first writer in Britain to write serialized short stories (at the time, serialized publishing had already been in place for decades, but not with short stories; instead, newspaper mostly published chapters of one ongoing novel week after week). He explains the reason for this new form of narrative in his memoirs:

“Considering the various journals with the disconnected stories, it had struck me that a single character running through a series, if it only engaged the attention of the reader, would bind that reader to that particular magazine. On the other hand, it had long seemed to me that the ordinary serial might be an impediment rather than a help to a magazine, since sooner or later, one missed one number and afterwards it had lost all interest. Clearly the ideal compromise was a character which carried through, and yet instalments which were each complete in themselves, so that the purchaser was always sure that he could relish the whole contents of the magazine. I believe that I was the first to realize this and ‘The Strand Magazine’ the first to put it into practice” *Memories and Adventures* 90

This idea undoubtedly helped ensure the popularity of the Sherlock Holmes series, and was also a relief for Conan Doyle: since his readers could miss a story or two, or read them in the wrong order, he did not have to worry too much about a proper chronology anyway. However, as we have already seen, he did pay a lot of attention to reader response and considered writing a real vocation, not merely a way to make easy money (even though he preferred writing more serious things than popular fiction). This is also, perhaps, what set the holmesian canon apart from “cheap fiction” right from the start: the respect the author had for both his readers and his creation. Conan Doyle maintained the same standards in the whole canon, in spite of his growing weariness of his hero; this is why, when he decided to kill Holmes off, he had to create a character that would match his powers (Holmes could not

possibly lose against any small-time criminal, it had to be against “The Napoleon of Crime”).²²

Speaking of Sherlock Holmes's death at the hands of Professor Moriarty, we must take into account the readers' response to this event, in order to fully understand how Conan Doyle played with the expectations of his public. The publication of *The Final Problem* caused a general uproar, and both Conan Doyle and the editors of *The Strand* were flooded with letters; what is perhaps even more interesting is that a good many letters were sent to “Mrs. Hudson” or “Dr. Watson” at the address 221B Baker Street -which was, incidentally, a completely fictional street- to offer condolences, to ask for the confirmation of Holmes's death or, on the contrary, to denounce the whole story as a forgery and demand the truth. Julian Barnes, with his usual tongue-in-cheek humour, recounts the months following Holmes's “death” in his novel *Arthur and George*; he even goes so far as to describe people wearing black bands on their arms in sign of mourning. The information would be hard to verify, but it is not completely unlikely, and it does give a very good illustration of the holmes-mania that already existed in Britain at the time. Conan Doyle himself reports the event in his *Memories and Adventures*:

“I was amazed at the concern expressed by the public. They say that a man is never properly appreciated until he is dead, and the general protest against my summary execution of Holmes taught me how many and how numerous were his friends. 'You Brute' was the beginning of the letter of remonstrance which one lady sent me, and I expect she spoke for others besides herself. I heard of many who wept.” 94

Still, the whole event shows us how effective Conan Doyle's constant experimentations with verisimilitude and realism proved: some readers were convinced (or pretended to be convinced) that Holmes and Watson did exist. The reader response was, in a way, the exact mirror of Conan Doyle's writing: he included as many real elements as he could in his fictional world, so the readers eventually took the fictional characters and made them part of their own realities. We must never lose sight of the important meta-literary dimension in the canon, present through Holmes's and Watson's frequent bickering concerning the rules of popular fiction and Holmes's heroic status.

Conan Doyle's most daring narrative experimentation is doubtlessly *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, published between 1901 and 1902. When every holmesian aficionado expected

²² Interestingly enough, if Conan Doyle complained at length about Holmes and made it public that he did not like the character, he never said anything of the sort about Watson. Perhaps because, as we have already shown, the fictional doctor had so much of his author in him.

him to resurrect the detective in a new collection of short stories or to recount the unrecorded cases mentioned in passing in other adventures, he decided to do neither: Holmes was not resurrected, since the story was set before his demise in Switzerland, and it was in a serialized novel, not a series of short stories, that he made this first comeback. Readers were all the more taken aback when they were left alone with Watson for two thirds of the narrative, in an unfamiliar Gothic environment with a seemingly supernatural menace. In the end, both the novel and Conan Doyle's strategy were met with an overwhelming success, prompting not only Holmes' real resurrection in 1903 but also more experimentations on Conan Doyle's parts: the following collections had Holmes thwarting the plots of German spies, reuniting with Mycroft over lost submarine blueprints, battling an ape-man, a venomous jellyfish or the "Sussex Vampire"... We must also note that Conan Doyle always refused to write accounts of the unrecorded cases, despite a strong demand from both the public and the editors: the editors of *The Bookman* wrote, in June 1903, "One thing, we trust, will be insisted upon; and that is that in these new stories we shall find narrated those adventures which are only hinted at in the existing memoirs of Holmes, and which have been tantalizing us for many years. We append here with a list of them as casually mentioned by Dr. Watson, and we feel we have a right to insist that they shall all be narrated at full length."²³ The only exception is *The Adventure of the Second Stain* (published in 1904), which was referred to in both *The Yellow Face* and *The Naval Treaty* (both published in 1893), but the account did not include all the element that had been teased before -this led at least one Holmes specialist, David Brend, to surmise that there might have been two cases entitled "The Second Stain", one of which was never written.

b) The birth of detective fiction: Conan Doyle's influence on later writers

We could argue that it was by keeping his narrative open to new ideas and influences that Conan Doyle ensured his heroes' popularity. We must remember, however, that Conan Doyle may not have been as aware as we are now that he was toying with subjects and *topoi* belonging to different fictional genres (like adventure, romance, espionage, Gothic literature, horror or science-fiction): indeed, detective fiction did not truly exist before Conan Doyle, as no author (in the English-speaking world at least) had endeavoured to write a consistent series of narratives belonging to that genre. As we are about to see now, he brought to light most of the central issues that later writers would place at the heart of their narratives, and one could even go so far as to say that the holmesian canon carried the seeds of all the different branches of crime novels that we can think of today. He was also the first writer of detective fiction to

²³ "Chronicle and Comment," in *The Bookman*, June 1903, p.341, quoted in Wisser, 12; underlining added

truly reflect upon his art, be it through the debates between Holmes and Watson or in his essays, articles and memoirs. One of his difficulties, immediately perceptible upon reading the first two novels of the canon, was to find a proper balance between the adventures and the investigations: at a time when most of the production in popular literature was made of what we could call adventure novels (which, more often than not, were also historical romances), creating something entirely new would have been too much of a gamble for an aspiring author; his choice to have a strong component of adventure in the first two novels of the canon, to the detriment of the investigation some would say, is therefore understandable. The last two novels, however, show us the evolution of Conan Doyle as a writer, as they are much more concerned with the investigation: in *The Valley of Fear*, the part devoted to the adventure is much smaller and more related to the investigation and to the genre of detective fiction, as it presents us with detectives of the American Pinkerton agency struggling to uproot a gang of criminals from a town in Pennsylvania; in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* it is outright absent, replaced -one could argue- with Watson's Gothic descriptions and investigation. This dichotomy between action and reflection was more or less solved by later writers, giving birth to different genres in the process: Agatha Christie's novels solely focused on investigation as she chose heroes that were all brain and no brawn (the elderly Miss Marple, the quiet and fashion-obsessed Hercule Poirot) and gave birth to the *whodunit*, along with John Dickson Carr, Gaston Leroux and some others; Maurice Leblanc, who worshipped Conan Doyle (we have already mentioned his creation of Herlock Sholmès as an adversary of Arsène Lupin's), was more interested in adventures, and his influenced can be found in the thriller genre.

Conan Doyle's legacy cannot be reduced to these two schools, however. Holmes's sometimes difficult relationship with the official forces and his opposition to traditional justice can remind one of the hard boiled or the pulp genres, in which the detective is very much alone against the rest of the world, and questions of morals and ethics are usually difficult to answer; similarly, the hard-boiled often focuses on characters having various addictions, usually in the lower classes of society, in an elaborately grim atmosphere: this obviously makes us think of cases like *The Man with the Twisted Lip*, in which the first pages see Watson going on his own to an opium den, or *The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton*, in which Holmes faces off against the eponymous character, an utterly amoral blackmailer. We have already quoted many cases linked to the political scene, and Holmes's frequent incursions in the world of spies, uncovering and thwarting plots to blackmail a minister (*The Second Stain*), steal classified blueprints (*The Bruce-Partington Plans*) or gain

the upper hand against Britain's military forces (*His Last Bow*); this mixture of investigation and political fiction has been used ever since in political thrillers like those written by John Le Carré. Finally, Conan Doyle's influence can be felt in the numerous crime fictions that pit a detective (or a scientist, in short the representative of a rational perspective on life) against an apparently supernatural foe; we may think, for example, of Gaston Leroux's *The Phantom of the Opera*, of John Dickson Carr's Henri Bencolin series, or more recently of Fred Vargas's *Have Mercy on Us All*. This is not exactly a genre, more of a patchwork tradition that branches out to fantasy, horror and science-fiction, and reminds us of some of Conan Doyle's tales like *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, *The Yellow Face* or *The Crooked Man*, two cases in which one can find strong Gothic echoes, *The Creeping Man*, a case which borrows heavily on *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* by presenting us with a university professor degenerating to become an ape-man in an attempt to be young again, or *The Sussex Vampire* (the title says it all).

In other words, Conan Doyle more than his two predecessors ensured the popularity of detective fiction by preparing the ground for later writers, such as Agatha Christie, John Dickson Carr or Maurice Leblanc. More than his three predecessors (Poe, Gaboriau and Stevenson), he set down the main rules of the genre and created a template that would be followed afterwards, but never ceased to toy with the topic and the tone of his narratives as well as with the expectations of his readers and editors. But this alone might not have sufficed to make Holmes and Watson that famous -after all, other writers have equally helped develop a genre, or created one, and constantly experimented with their narrative material, without being half as popular as Conan Doyle- had their author not opened the canon to the possibility of transmediality, by preparing and encouraging the adaptive process, as we are about to see now.

C) Beyond the source-text: Conan Doyle preparing his own adaptations

1] *How Watson Learned the Trick*: self-parody and rewritings

For Conan Doyle, the Sherlock Holmes adventures were never serious literature, because he did not see them as anything more than popular fiction. The main consequence of this relative disdain for Holmes and Watson can be felt in Conan Doyle's disregard for almost any notion of continuity and chronology, but also through the important presence of humour in the canon, contrary to Conan Doyle's more serious literary endeavours. Irony and dry humour are essential components of the great detective's character, that go hand in hand with the very theatrical way in which he handles the investigation (disguising himself, keeping

even Watson in the dark until the final revelation...): Holmes is as much an actor as he is a detective, and he is always very much aware of the presence of an audience (both the few who are actually present with him during the investigation, and the many that will read Watson's account of the case). There is hardly an adventure in which Holmes makes no jokes at all: even at the direst moments or in the most dramatic situations, the detective is known for his humour. We can think of *The Dying Detective* as a striking example: Holmes pretends to be infected with a terminal illness so that he can catch a particularly ruthless criminal. On second reading, when the reader knows that Holmes is feigning delirium, his cues become extremely funny, because they are full of nonsense: he seems to be suddenly terrified of oysters, for example (“Indeed, I cannot think why the whole bed of the ocean is not one solid mass of oysters, so prolific the creatures seem.” and later “No doubt there are natural enemies which limit the increase of the creatures. You and I, Watson, we have done our part. Shall the world, then, be overrun by oysters? No, no; horrible!”, both p.788). We can also remember his verbal exchanges with his brother (in the first pages of *The Greek Interpreter*); but what illustrates best this side of the detective is, of course, his usual banter with Watson. In this respect, the first scene of *The Valley of Fear* is a good example, but we shall analyse it in our second chapter and chose not to reproduce it here; instead, we can refer to *The Final Problem* and *The Empty House* in which Holmes plays what we can describe only as pranks on his friend, by disguising himself and surprising him at the least likely moments:

“In vain I searched among the groups of travellers and leave-takers for the lithe figure of my friend. There was no sign of him. I spent a few minutes in assisting a venerable Italian priest, who was endeavouring to make a porter understand, in his broken English, that his luggage was to be booked through to Paris. Then, having taken another look round, I returned to my carriage, where I found that the porter, in spite of the ticket, had given me my decrepit Italian friend as a travelling companion. [...] A chill of fear fell over me, as I thought that [Holmes's] absence might mean that some blow had fallen during the night. Already the doors had been shut and the whistle blown, when—

'My dear Watson,' said a voice, 'you have not even condescended to say good morning.'

I turned in incontrollable astonishment. The aged ecclesiastic had turned his face towards me. For an instant the wrinkles were smoothed away, the nose drew away from the chin, the lower lip ceased to protrude and the mouth to mumble, the dull eyes regained their fire, the drooping figure expanded. The next the whole frame collapsed, and Holmes had gone as quickly as he had come.” *The Final Problem* 428

“I had not been in my study five minutes when the maid entered to say that a person desired to see me. To my astonishment, it was none other than my strange old book-collector, his sharp, wizened face peering out from a frame

of white hair, and his precious volume, a dozen of them at least, wedged under his right arm.

'You're surprised to see me, sir,' said he, in a strange, croaking voice.

I acknowledged that I was.

[...]

I moved my head to look at the cabinet behind me. When I turned again Sherlock Holmes was standing smiling at me across my study table. I rose to my feet, stared at him for some seconds in utter amazement, and then it appears that I must have fainted for the first and the last time in my life. Certainly a grey mist swirled before my eyes, and when it cleared I found my collar-ends undone and the tingling after-taste of brandy upon my lips. Holmes was bending over my chair, his flask in his hand.

'My dear Watson,' said the well-remembered voice, 'I owe you a thousand apologies. I had no idea that you would be so affected.'" *The Empty House* 441/442

The element of repetition itself in the investigations might very well have been intended by Conan Doyle to create a comical effect, as the two extracts above would tend to make us think. In a genre and a corpus of texts where repetition is the rule, Holmes's complaints that the criminal classes are always repeating themselves and never doing anything original sounds like a meta-literary wink at the reader; so do his frequent jokes concerning his heroic status that, according to him, Watson created almost from scratch. His awareness of being fictionalized by Watson leads to debates in which he almost breaks the fourth wall, to use a theatrical metaphor: we may remember that, in *A Scandal in Bohemia*, he prompts Watson to accompany him by remarking ironically "I am lost without my Boswell" (13).²⁴ Finally, the most obvious comical device is the absurd repetition of the reactions to Holmes's detection expressed by the clients, the police or even Watson: the lack of variations in the emotions and in the way they are expressed renders the whole reaction almost mechanical, even more so with each repetition; Holmes almost appears to be the only sane man in a world of fools or idiots with very short-term memories.

What is more interesting for our research is probably the fact that Conan Doyle himself wrote one of the first full-fledged parodies of the adventures of Sherlock Holmes. The very short story (503 words), was invented in 1923 for Queen Mary's Dolls' House and entitled *How Watson Learned the Trick*. As the title indicates, it describes Watson's first attempt at using Holmes's techniques of observation and deduction:

"Watson had been watching his companion intently ever since he had sat down to the breakfast table. Holmes happened to look up and catch his eye.

'Well, Watson, what are you thinking about?' he asked.

²⁴ This allusion, which was clear for Conan Doyle's contemporary, may need some explanation for modern readers: James Boswell was a Scottish man of letters who lived in the 18th century and who became famous by writing a very laudatory biography of Samuel Johnson in 1791. According to Harold Bloom, this biography is the greatest ever written in the English language.

'About you.'

'Me?'

'Yes, Holmes. I was thinking how superficial are these tricks of yours, and how wonderful it is that the public should continue to show interest in them.'

'I quite agree,' said Holmes. 'In fact, I have a recollection that I have myself made a similar remark.'

'Your methods,' said Watson severely, 'are really easily acquired.'

'No doubt,' Holmes answered with a smile. 'Perhaps you will yourself give an example of this method of reasoning.'

'With pleasure,' said Watson. 'I am able to say that you were greatly preoccupied when you got up this morning.'

'Excellent!' said Holmes. 'How could you possibly know that?'

'Because you are usually a very tidy man and yet you have forgotten to shave.'

'Dear me! How very clever!' said Holmes. 'I had no idea, Watson, that you were so apt a pupil. Has your eagle eye detected anything more?'

'Yes, Holmes. You have a client named Barlow, and you have not been successful with his case.'

'Dear me, how could you know that?'

'I saw the name outside his envelope. When you opened it you gave a groan and thrust it into your pocket with a frown on your face.'

'Admirable! You are indeed observant. Any other points?'

'I fear, Holmes, that you have taken to financial speculation.'

'How *could* you tell that, Watson?'

'You opened the paper, turned to the financial page, and gave a loud exclamation of interest.'

'Well, that is very clever of you, Watson. Any more?'

'Yes, Holmes, you have put on your black coat, instead of your dressing gown, which proves that you are expecting some important visitor at once.'

'Anything more?'

'I have no doubt that I could find other points, Holmes, but I only give you these few, in order to show you that there are other people in the world who can be as clever as you.'

'And some not so clever,' said Holmes. 'I admit that they are few, but I am afraid, my dear Watson, that I must count you among them.'

'What do you mean, Holmes?'

'Well, my dear fellow, I fear your deductions have not been so happy as I should have wished.'

'You mean that I was mistaken.'

'Just a little that way, I fear. Let us take the points in their order: I did not shave because I have sent my razor to be sharpened. I put on my coat because I have, worse luck, an early meeting with my dentist. His name is Barlow, and the letter was to confirm the appointment. The cricket page is beside the financial one, and I turned to it to find if Surrey was holding its own against Kent. But go on, Watson, go on! It's a very superficial trick, and no doubt you will soon acquire it.'"²⁵

The elements of parody here are quite simple and easy to spot, as the humour is based on the inversion of the parts played by the two friends: for once, it is Watson who “detects” Holmes, in a way that mirrors exactly the detective's usual attitude to his clients and his

²⁵ The text can be found on many websites; we have chosen to reproduce it here as it can be found on the excellent sherlockian.net, with a slight alteration of the punctuation marks to match the extracts of the canon that we use in the rest of this research project.

friend. The three different stages of the scene of detection as established by Holmes are dutifully followed by the doctor: first, Watson voices his disdain for the art of detection, on the grounds that it is made of “superficial [...] tricks” that anyone can perform without much of an effort, to which Holmes replies “In fact, I have a recollection that I have myself made a similar remark.” It is indeed one of Holmes's frequent complaints that people see but do not observe, or that they use their brains in an unproductive way; it might even be the reason why he does not really see himself as a hero and often remarks that the deductions he makes are hardly more than child's play.²⁶ Then, Watson makes assertions about Holmes's activities in the same peremptory tone Holmes always speaks in (one may recall the first two chapters of *A Study in Scarlet*, in which Holmes does the first demonstration of his prowesses to Watson, with the famous: “You have been in Afghanistan, I perceive.” p.6), prompting an exclamation of surprise and a request for an explanation on the other's part. Here of course, Holmes is being very ironical in his answers to Watson, feigning to be impressed while knowing that every single assertion made by the doctor is wrong, but despite of the irony there is no difference from the usual template. Finally, Watson explains his thought process, going over everything he observed and what he deduced from it: as always, the attention of the detective is focused on small details like the page of the journal one is looking at, or one's expression upon reading something. Eventually, as we know, Watson's conclusions prove completely wrong, and the explanation for Holmes's actions is much simpler than any of the hypotheses his friend came up with. This is extremely interesting, as it shows that this short text is in fact more than a relatively simple parody of the canon: by choosing to have simple and commonplace explanations for all of Holmes's actions instead of Watson's more ludicrous ones, Conan Doyle is casting a critical glance on the canon as a whole, and even on the rules of popular fiction. It is as if, through this short story, Conan Doyle was mocking the artificiality and the unrealistic intricacy of the plots and of the “Science of Detection” upon which the genre he has created rests: indeed, for detective fiction to work and to enthral the reader (at least, at the time when Conan Doyle and his first followers were writing), the plot always has to be elaborate to the point of absurdity, relying on the detective's ever-alert eye that catches even the smallest detail, and on his seemingly all-encompassing knowledge that allows him to link a tiny spot of dirt on the client's soles to the particular kind of mud that can

²⁶ The infamous quote “Elementary, my dear Watson” springs to mind here, as it illustrates very well what we have just said. We must remember, however, that this quote is nowhere to be found in the canon, and was invented by P.G. Wodehouse in his novel *Psmith, Journalist* which was published in serialized form in 1909 and has nothing to do with the holmesian canon. The phrase was meant as an ironical reference, but was in fact taken up in most of the holmesian adaptations, and is still frequently misquoted as having been created by Conan Doyle.

be found in only one estate in England.²⁷ In this short story, Conan Doyle makes what is probably his first and only attempt at really confronting Holmes and Watson to the real world, and shows the reader that the methods of the detective would in fact not work in it because they are a fictional device, based on assertions and performative utterances rather than on hypotheses and experimentations, more than anything else. At the same time, the aim of Conan Doyle through that very short story is implicitly to signal his creation as being free for appropriation, even through parody.

Conan Doyle's example paved the way for more rewritings, the first of which appeared very early on. It is difficult to measure exactly how many writers of popular fiction wrote variations on the holmesian canon (not to mention the involuntary homages that critics may have read in pieces that were not explicitly holmesian adaptations or appropriations). The first two characters that derived explicitly from Holmes and Watson were probably E. W. Hornung's Arthur J. Raffles and Maurice Leblanc's Arsène Lupin. Both authors intended their creations to be “inversion[s] of Sherlock Holmes”²⁸: criminals who use their superior skills to baffle the police, whilst remaining gentlemanly at the same time; anti-heroes, in fact, more than villains. It is interesting to note that Conan Doyle did not completely approve of these two endeavours: to quote again from his memoirs, he argued that this kind of inversion was “dangerous,” ending the paragraph with an implacable judgement: “You must not make the criminal a hero.”²⁹ This serves as a proof that, in Conan Doyle's mind, morality is a major issue in the writing of popular fiction, because of the fascination that the popular hero might elicit in the reader; the notion of the hero as an example for the rest of mankind, leading men on the road to progress (coming –as we have said– from Carlyle's work), is evidently at the back of the author's mind when he makes these remarks on Hornung's homage.

The full ambiguity of Conan Doyle's attitude to his creation (and to popular literature in general) is made clear with this paradox: on the one hand, he did not take it too seriously and was therefore able to take some distance from it through irony, parody and self-mockery; on the other hand, he deemed the matter important enough to attach it to a set of unwavering moral principles and strongly oppose anyone who would take it too lightly. However, even

²⁷ This striking example is in fact not to be found in the canon, but in the 1942 John Rawlins film *Sherlock Holmes and the Voice of Terror* (with Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce). The canon, however, does provide us with a large number of similar examples (see for example the “scenes of gratuitous detection”, which we will analyse and explain in our second chapter)

²⁸ The quote is from the Conan Doyle's *Memories and Adventures* and concerns only Raffles. Additionally, the first volume of stories featuring Raffles was dedicated to Conan Doyle, in these words: “To A.C.D., This Form of Flattery”. Both quotes can be found in one article of *The Strand Magazine* (online) entitled “Raffles: The Gentleman Thief,” written by Richard Bleiler.

²⁹ Both quotes are also reproduced in Richard Bleiler's article.

before indulging in this parody of his two most famous characters, Conan Doyle had rooted them in popular culture through the use of other media. Holmes and Watson built their iconic statuses mostly thanks to the illustrations that accompanied the weekly publications of their adventures in *The Strand*, and thanks to the actors who gave their voices and bodies in order to bring them to life. We will quickly examine the changes that these media brought to the canon, and how Conan Doyle still managed to get a grip on the evolution of the image of Holmes and Watson in popular culture

2] Giving faces to Holmes and Watson: a quick history of Holmes illustrated

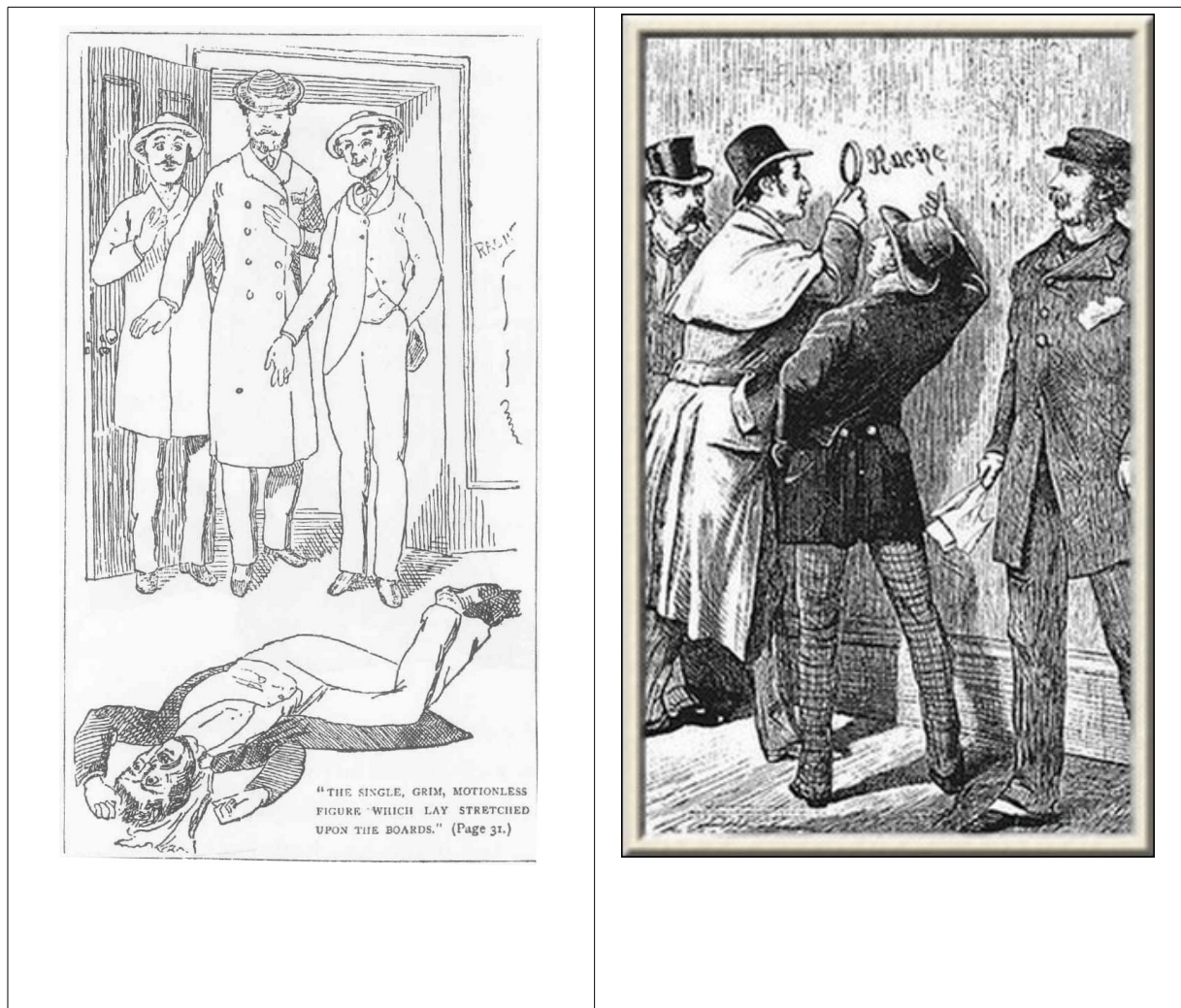
We have already studied a few illustrations of the canon drawn by either Frederic Dorr Steele or Sidney Paget, but we must remember that they were not the only two people Conan Doyle entrusted with giving a face to the world's greatest detective. The history of the birth of an illustrated Holmes was, in fact, quite complicated and eventful, and it does have a bearing on the way the characters are perceived nowadays. Katherine Wisser's work reminds us that there have been no less than seventeen different illustrators for the whole canon at the time when Conan Doyle was alive (to count those that came after his death would be utterly impossible), if we take into account both the British and the American editions. The part they played in popularizing Conan Doyle's tales must not be underrated, and can be illustrated with a simple example: we know very well that the first two canonical narratives that Conan Doyle wrote (*A Study in Scarlet* and *The Sign of the Four*) were not met with a massive success; it was only when the first short stories began to be published in *The Strand* that Conan Doyle's fame began to rise. This newfound popularity may be explained by the relatively new format Conan Doyle had invented (as we have already said), but also by the fact that *The Strand* was one of the first fully illustrated magazines that were sold at a relatively low price, enabling it to reach a wider audience. As George Newnes, the chief editor, fully understood, the quality and number of the illustrations gave more visibility not only to the magazine but also to their protégé Conan Doyle. What also helped was that, at the time, *The Strand* secured the services of the English illustrator that will have the strongest influence on Conan Doyle's creation, so much that his name is still remembered today: Sidney Paget. He illustrated no less than thirty-seven short stories and one novel, which amounts to something like three hundred and fifty-six illustrations between 1891 and 1904. He was, consequently, the illustrator that truly created the visual identity of all of Conan Doyle's characters, for two reasons: because he was the first, and because he was one of the most prolific. It is interesting to note the evolution in Paget's drawings, as the artist's fame grew in conjunction with that of the author: his

illustrations became more and more elaborate, and also more and more important in size. As early as the end of second collection of short stories, *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*, almost every story was accompanied with one full-page illustration, in addition to the smaller ones; the first one remains one of the most famous holmesian illustrations ever, and represents Holmes and Moriarty fighting at the Reichenbach Falls (that we have already featured).

Paget's influence is easy to trace, as he added many elements to the imagery of the canon, and changed quite a few at the same time. His Holmes is in fact physically different from the description of the character in *A Study in Scarlet*, even though he is also tall and very lean: Paget's Holmes is quite handsome, with an aquiline nose (rather than a "hawk-like" one). An even more striking example is his Watson, since Paget had to create a visual identity for him from scratch (as he is the narrator in every book, there is never any real description of his appearance). Incidentally, some critics have argued that Paget modelled his Holmes and his Watson after two of his acquaintances (his little brother for Holmes and a fellow illustrator for Watson); he did indeed pay a lot of attention to the realistic portrayal of facial expressions, emotions, and gave every character in the story recognizable looks, even though these looks may differ greatly from the original description. Conan Doyle himself remarked so in his memoirs: "I may say that all of [the many impersonations of Holmes], and all the drawings, are very unlike my own original idea of the man. [...] It chanced, however, that poor Sidney Paget who, before his premature death, drew all the original pictures, had a younger brother whose name, I think, was Walter, who served him as a model. The handsome Walter took the place of the more powerful but uglier Sherlock, and perhaps from the point of view of my lady readers it was as well. The stage has followed the type set up by the pictures." (*Memories and Adventures*, 101). What is for certain is that Sidney Paget can be credited for creating several details that have become inseparable from Holmes and Watson: the deerstalker hat, the Inverness cape, the calabash pipe for Holmes; the moustache and bowler hat for Watson. Most of these details have been taken up almost immediately by one of the first actors to play Holmes for a number of years, William Gillette, of whom we will speak in more details later on.

Paget was not, however, the first illustrator of the canon, even though nearly everyone thinks him to be. We must not forget that the first two novels were published before Conan Doyle stroke up a partnership with George Newnes and *The Strand*, and that hardly any piece of popular fiction at that time was published without at least a cover illustration. Consequently, at least two illustrators were confronted to the task of creating a visual identity for Conan Doyle's character before Paget solved the riddle. And a riddle it was indeed:

Holmes's appearance had to signal him as different from the other characters; his looks had to be as memorable for the reader as the feats he accomplished. The first man who was charged with the task was named D.H. Friston, and was already a seasoned illustrator: he had already given a face to the characters of the infamous vampire novel *Carmilla* by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu (published in 1872), and illustrated most of the reviews of Gilbert and Sullivan operas for the newspapers. He did not, however, manage to convince the readers nor the author with his drawings of the great detective and attracted quite a lot of criticism from different sources.³⁰ Conan Doyle, probably out of a sense of family duty, also asked his father, the illustrator Charles Altamont Doyle, to draw some pictures of Holmes and Watson for the publication of *A Study in Scarlet*; unfortunately, the skills that Doyle Sr. had once possessed were by then greatly diminished by his chronic depression and alcoholism, and the few illustrations he managed to deliver were of a poor quality. Here are two illustrations of the same passage, the first by Doyle Sr. and the second by Friston.:



³⁰ Two examples can be found in an article in *The Bookman: A Review of Books and Life* (1932) and in *The Bedside, Bathtub, and Armchair Companion to Sherlock Holmes* by Dick Riley and Pam McAllister.

<i>A Study in Scarlet</i> , Charles Altamont Doyle	<i>A Study in Scarlet</i> , D.H. Friston

Even though neither were successful in giving Holmes or Watson a definite visual identity, it is interesting to note that both already took some liberties with the descriptions of the characters provided by Conan Doyle; the most striking in this respect is Doyle Sr., whose bearded Holmes is surprising to say the least, even for us (though we have now seen Holmes with hundreds of different faces). As we have seen, this freedom from the original material is going to be advocated and practised by Paget himself when he takes the mantle of the official illustrator.

This quick review of the early illustrators of the canon would not be complete without us mentioning Frederic Dorr Steele, to whom we have already alluded. Even though he came after Paget (he started illustrating the canon with the American edition of *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* in 1903) and he was not the first illustrator attached to the American publication of the canon, he is the most remembered today among the numerous American illustrators. In many respects, his Holmes is for the Americans what Paget's was for the British: the first true pictorial incarnation of the character. Frederic Dorr Steele is all the more interesting to our research as he explicitly based his Holmes on a real person: William Gillette, who was the first actor to play Holmes on stage, and who became internationally famous for that. By capitalizing on Gillette's looks, he anchored his illustrations even more in the real world.³¹ Frederic Dorr Steele's illustrations were quite different from Paget's on

³¹ Taking an actor associated with Holmes as a model for one's illustration is also something we will see in Olivier Cotte's and Jules Stromboni's graphic novel adaptation of Michael Dibdin's *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story*. The relevance of their choice of actor will be discussed at that moment. For Steele, things are quite simple: Gillette's face was immediately associated with the character of Holmes by most people,

several levels, two of which are important for our study: first, there were fewer illustrations in the American editions of the canon, because American newspapers and magazines were cheaper than their British counterparts (as Wisser mentions in passing); consequently, Steele was more what we would call now a cover artist. And because he mostly took care of covers, he did not have the same limitations Paget had with colours; most of Steele's illustrations are therefore coloured. As we have already seen some of Steele's illustrations, we will not dwell longer on this subject; another quick remark we can make, however, is that whereas Paget seems very much influenced by the European tradition of old master prints (Dürer, Doré...), Steele's own illustrations lay the groundwork for the American tradition of the comic book, with his use of a thicker inking, more realistic poses and proportions, and colours.

Conan Doyle was very much aware of the importance of the illustrators' work in continuing the task of ensuring the popularity of the canon; in an interview, in 1921, he commented: “if my little creation of Sherlock Holmes has survived longer perhaps than it deserved, I consider that it is very largely due to those gentlemen who have, apart from myself, associated themselves with him.”³² Of course, he referred mostly to his favourite illustrator and collaborator in *The Strand* Sidney Paget, but he also had someone else in mind: the actor William Gillette, who went even further than Paget by creating the first real re-writing of the canon in his 1899 four-act play *Sherlock Holmes*. As we are about to see now, the collaboration between Conan Doyle and Gillette cannot be summed up with just the infamous sentence “You may marry or murder or do what you like with [Holmes]” that is so often quoted as a perfect example of Conan Doyle's care-free attitude to his creation; in fact, before Conan Doyle could accept such an adaptation, there were several failed attempts at bringing Holmes to life, and the author was originally not that permissive.³³

3] Transmediality, a lasting impetus

Conan Doyle was very much aware of the contribution of media other than literature to the rise of what would become mass culture, especially media linked to the visual arts. Moreover, it was customary at the time to adapt for the stage works of fiction that had proved popular on paper (we can think of Dickens's public readings, or of Jules Verne's staged adaptations of his *Voyages extraordinaires*); sometimes, the author would himself write the adaptation (as with Dickens), sometimes he would collaborate with someone more familiar with the rules of drama (as with Jules Verne). In the case of Conan Doyle, the first two

especially in America (Gillette was American as well), so it was both a way to pay homage to the actor and to make the illustration resonate with the reader's potential knowledge of the canon.

³² Conan Doyle in interview, in Wisser, *op. cit.*, 41

³³ The sentence and its context can be found in *Memories and Adventures*, p.97.

Holmes play were created more or less without him (Charles Brookfield's 1893 *Under the clock* and John Webb's 1894 *Sherlock Holmes*), because of the author's rising disinterest for his creation. However, after having killed off Holmes in *The Final Problem*, he found himself under financial strain; rather than resurrect the character right away, he decided to bring him to the stage with an early adventure of Holmes and Watson, that would also feature Moriarty (oddly enough). He offered the part to Henry Irving, who turned it down; he also contacted Herbert Beerbohm Tree, who was known for his adaptations of popular novels. However, Conan Doyle and Beerbohm Tree quickly fell out, as Tree demanded extensive reworkings of the manuscript, and wanted to play both Holmes and Moriarty onstage; this was the last straw and Conan Doyle canceled the deal, apparently on the grounds that it would debase the character of Holmes.³⁴ As we can see, even though Conan Doyle was bored by Holmes and did not want to write any more adventures, he was still very much attached to his creation to the point that he could not accept other perspectives on the character.

Many years later, when thinking back on the subject of the different adaptations for the stage of the canon, Conan Doyle would write this about Gillette's play:

“[The play] was written and most wonderfully acted by William Gillette, the famous American. Since he used my characters and to some extent my plots, he naturally gave me a share in the undertaking, which proved to be very successful. 'May I marry Holmes?' was one cable which I received from him when in the throes of composition. 'You may marry or murder or do what you like with him,' was my heartless reply. I was charmed both with the play, the acting and the pecuniary result.” *Memories and Adventures*, 97

It is interesting that he should never mention, in his memoirs, the first endeavour that we have just discussed; indeed, he refers to Gillette's play as “the first [Sherlock Holmes play]”, something which we know to be untrue. We can only surmise that he wanted to pay homage to Gillette's talent as an actor, and perhaps that he felt that Gillette's play was the first valid Sherlock Holmes adaptation from his point of view, as he had been consulted and had partaken in the writing of the manuscript (though remotely).³⁵ Indeed, after his two failed attempts at bringing Holmes to the stage, Conan Doyle was contacted by Charles Frohman, Gillette's American producer, who managed to convince him that Gillette would be the right man for Holmes. After some negotiation, Frohman and Gillette were allowed to adapt Holmes for the stage, under Conan Doyle's supervision however; at that point in time (in the late

³⁴ Unfortunately, we have not been able to find any source to confirm that piece of information other than wikipedia. Nevertheless, we chose to mention it here, because it does give an interesting insight into Conan Doyle's mind at an early stage of the adaptive process.

³⁵ The context of the extract in *Memories and Adventures* seems to confirm our interpretation, as the “second Sherlock Holmes play” Conan Doyle mentions is his own stage adaptation of *The Speckled Band* in 1910 (ibid).

1890s), Conan Doyle was still adamant that there should be no major alteration to his creation (for example, no love interest for Holmes).

The play *Sherlock Holmes* premiered on October 23, 1899 in Buffalo (New York), and was an instant success. It was, however, fairly different from what Conan Doyle had originally intended: the plot was a far cry from *A Scandal in Bohemia* and *A Study in Scarlet*, but added elements from *The Final Problem*, *The Boscombe Valley Mystery*, *The Greek Interpreter* and *The Sign of the Four*; it featured Holmes and Moriarty, but Watson was hardly present, replaced with a pageboy named Billy, and Irene Adler was reworked into the character of Alice Faulkner, whom Holmes eventually becomes infatuated with.³⁶ Moreover, following a fire in the hotel where Gillette was staying, both Conan Doyle's and Gillette's original manuscripts were destroyed, and the actor re-wrote the play on his own without the author's intervention (even though he did go to Conan Doyle before the play was first performed to ask for his permission). What, then, made Conan Doyle's mind change so much? Why did he accept William Gillette's many changes to the characters where he had refused Herbert Beerbohm Tree's? A first answer may lie in the fact that in Gillette, Conan Doyle truly saw his character, despite the physical differences we have already mentioned. The first time Gillette made Conan Doyle to ask him if he could change the whole script, the actor arrived dressed entirely as the detective and, after examining him closely with a magnifying glass, declared "Unquestionably an author!"; Conan Doyle, probably struck by the commitment of the actor and by his well-defined vision of the character, allowed him to take liberties with the original script.³⁷ But there must be more to it than that. The most likely hypothesis is that Conan Doyle's perspective on his work had changed. When Gillette came to him, Holmes had already been parodied by his friend J.M. Barrie (in 1893) and Hornung had published the first adventures of Arthur J. Raffles (in 1898/1899); moreover, Sidney Paget had by then established his reputation as the definitive Holmes illustrator, albeit the differences between his Holmes and Conan Doyle's. The author could feel his creation slowly drifting away from him, and probably understood at that point that there would be more and more adaptations of the canon, whether he liked it or not and with or without his permission. We think that it was when this idea dawned upon him that the change occurred, that made him reply to Gillette's telegram "May I marry Holmes?" the infamous sentence "You may marry or murder or do what you like with him." The reply itself could not be further from Conan Doyle's previous

³⁶ A film version of the play was shot in 1916, with Gillette reprising his role. The film was thought to be lost, but it was eventually found in 2014; it has been restored and is available online.

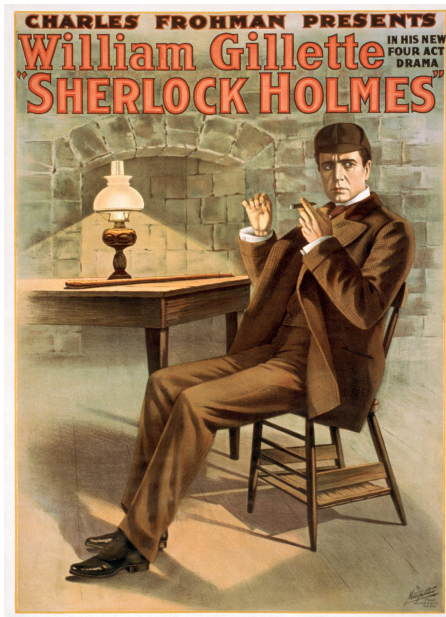
³⁷ This funny anecdote is reported in Matthew E. Bunson's *Encyclopedia Sherlockiana*, in the article devoted to William Gillette (p.90).

refusal to have Holmes and Moriarty portrayed by the same actor, or from his opposition to a love story involving the detective, only a couple of years before.

The transition to the big screen happened very early on as well, and is partially mentioned by Conan Doyle in his memoirs (though he mostly focuses on the financial problems that it created). He refers to it in connection to the theatrical adaptations of Holmes, and we must remember that at the time actors who toured the country (or countries) with a highly successful play could expect to reprise their roles for a film adaptation of that play, or vice versa: Eille Norwood, another famous face of Holmes in the 1920s whom Conan Doyle particularly liked, played the detective in films first and then on the stage. His films, produced by the Stoll Company, are the only ones explicitly mentioned by Conan Doyle in *Memories and Adventures*; we are now about to go over a few others that he might not have been aware of, but that are nonetheless important for the study of holmesian adaptations.

The first adaptation of the canon was made without Conan Doyle's consent (and, probably, without his awareness) in the 1900s, and entitled *Sherlock Holmes Baffled*; it was a 30-seconds silent film directed by Arthur Marvin in which a man in a smoking-gown (Holmes) is surprised by a black-clad thief that seems to vanish into thin air every time the detective tries to catch him (hence the title). As Thomas Leitch reminds us in *Film adaptation and its Discontents*, the plot is unrelated to the canon and the name of Holmes was probably chosen for its popular appeal alone (p.260). But more daring endeavours soon followed: in 1913, ten years after the book was published, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* was adapted for the screen for the first time, and it was not in UK but in Germany (proof of the international appeal of Conan Doyle's characters). Rudolf Meinert's *Der Hund von Baskerville* was a great success, spawning a number of sequels in Germany and signaling to the world that Sherlock Holmes was ready for the cinema. Another landmark is Arthur Berthelet's 1916 *Sherlock Holmes*, with William Gillette reprising his role as the great detective in this four-part silent film adapted from the play. The film, like the play, was a success, and is believed today to be the first in which Holmes is shown wearing all the elements added by Gillette to Conan Doyle's descriptions and Paget's illustrations of the detective (i.e. the deerstalker hat and calabash pipe, among other things). Not much has been written about the film since, as we have already mentioned, it was presumed lost for decades until it was eventually found in 2014. What is interesting to us, though, is that among the three films we have alluded to, only one is based directly on a story by Conan Doyle; the other two are original stories set (more or less) in the universe of Sherlock Holmes, that is to say rewritings. This, in turn, means that there were “always-already” (to use Paul Ricoeur's formulation) two traditions of film

adaptations for the characters of Holmes and Watson, one based on transposition, the other on invention.



Promotional poster for William Gillette's play *Sherlock Holmes* (artist unknown)

As we have seen in this first part, Conan Doyle worked hard to create new types of popular heroes for a new literary genre and to ensure their long-lasting popularity, mainly by experimenting constantly with the narratives; he also became aware of the importance of adaptation and transmediality in the early 20th century and eventually encouraged most of the holmesian adaptations in other media while providing some sort of guideline concerning what could and could not be done with the characters. However, the situation changed after Conan Doyle's death: without the author's presence and approval, many debates arose concerning the canon itself and also how to properly deal with Conan Doyle's legacy, thus giving rise to (at least) two traditions of adaptations, as we are about to see now.

II) Writing after Conan Doyle: legacy or legacies?

A) The cracks in the surface: a disunited canon

1] Self-contradictions, revisions, retcons: the errors of Conan Doyle

As Dana Shiller, the first critic to coin the term “neo-Victorian fiction,” wrote it in 1997, neo-Victorian fiction is often aimed at “questioning the certitude of our historical knowledge,” more specifically our pre-conceived ideas on the Victorian period (obviously). Another specialist, Patricia Pulham, argues in the conclusion of her essay “Mapping Histories: The Golem and the Serial Killer in White Chapell, Scarlet Tracings and Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem” that one of the tropes of neo-Victorian fiction is that “the literary past and its historical 'truth' [...] represent a 'lie'.”³⁸ Neo-Victorian rewritings of Conan Doyle's detective stories, however, are to be set apart on these grounds: indeed, where the works of a Thomas Hardy or a Charles Dickens are set in a fictional universe that makes sense as a whole, the holmesian canon is in itself fragmented, mysterious, and riddled with self-contradictions.³⁹ While this would seem like an advantage in submitting Holmes and Watson to a neo-Victorian treatment, things might prove a little more complicated: indeed, in order for a writer to appropriate Conan Doyle's legacy and submit it to questioning in a neo-Victorian way, he (or she) first needs to be aware and make sense of this profound disharmony. We will examine, in this sub-part, the causes and the extent of what we have called the 'cracks in the surface' of the canon.

Barry Forshaw, in *Crime Writing: An Encyclopedia*, playfully wrote that there were more biographies of Holmes than of Benjamin Disraeli. Whether or not this is true (it probably is), the fact is that Holmes' and Watson's lives have been the subject of a good many articles, books and debates. The reason for that is simple: although Conan Doyle wrote no less than sixty tales featuring the heroic duo, as little is known about their lives as about their physical appearance or their eating habits. The reader will gather enough evidence about their habits when they lived and investigated together, and a closer reading may provide a few more details on Watson's past as a rugby player or Holmes' retirement in Sussex, but nothing is known, for example, about Holmes' parents and education, or about Watson's possible children. It is probably best illustrated by the controversy around Watson's marriage: we know

³⁸ Patricia Pulham, in Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham, *op.cit.*, 178

³⁹ The reference to Dickens is fairly obvious, since many of his works depict characters struggling to make a decent living in the city, and often confronted to the problems of crime and punishment (though in quite a different way from Doyle's characters). The reference to Hardy may seem more problematic, but is in fact not: his fictional re-creation of the south-west of England, through the invention of names of places and people, is very close to the treatment London undergoes in the holmesian canon.

that he marries Mary Morstan at the end of *The Sign of the Four*, and goes on to live with her for some time, establishing a practice and visiting Holmes now and then. After that, he suddenly comes back to Baker Street to live with Holmes; a couple of years later, he moves out again, resumes his work as a doctor and has apparently a wife. No further details are given in the canon; since the stories are not published in a chronological order, most of the readers do not even realize that there is a problem because they only see two successive periods in Watson's life: living as a bachelor in Baker Street with Holmes, then marrying Mary Morstan and establishing a practice. However, for the critic and for the writer who wants to follow in Conan Doyle's footsteps, the issue cannot be avoided, and an explanation must be found. Obviously, the main answer is that Watson remarried at least once (some critics say twice) after his wife Mary died in unknown circumstances, prompting Watson's return to Baker Street. This lack of information about both Holmes and Watson is constant in the canon, thus explaining the need for later writers to invent information. We are dealing here with the same phenomenon –although on a smaller scale– as when Paget had Holmes don the deerstalker and the Inverness cape, and Watson grow a moustache: trying to compensate for the characters' lack of a definite visual identity, he added new elements to what Conan Doyle had written, and these elements were eventually assimilated into the canon. Similarly, one may guess which Holmes scholar one author has read by tracking down the non-canonical elements present in that Holmes pastiche (example: in his foreword to *The House of Silk*, Watson writes that he has been married twice and has had children, a detail of no importance to the novel otherwise but that shows Horowitz's awareness of the debate).

But things get worse: from the very start, critics have pointed outright errors in the canon. One of the most famous concerns is the location of Watson's wound that sent him back to London: in *A Study in Scarlet*, he has been wounded in the shoulder; in the following novel, *The Sign of the Four*, it is his leg that hurts; and this is only one of the many examples of self-contradictions. The main issues, however, are to be found not in these character details, but in the wider issue of its chronology. As we have seen, Conan Doyle himself chose to write stories not in a chronological order, the most striking example being *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, which we shall analyse in a few pages. The problem lies in the fact that not only very few dates are mentioned in the course of the narrative, but also in the fact that these dates do not always make sense: for example, *The Adventure of the Cardboard Box* was supposed to take place in August 1891, that is to say during the “Great Hiatus” (the three-years period between Holmes' apparent death at the hands of Moriarty in *The Final Problem* and his reunion with Watson at the end of *The Empty House*), which is completely absurd. This

example is the most blatant, but matters of chronology have always been discussed among scholars without ever reaching an agreement, and several chronologies exist -some of them being, nonetheless, more widely accepted than others- (see the excellent website Sherlockian.Net).

Finally, since we will be dealing with a graphic novel, it would be a shame not to mention a concept that has been widely used in recent comic books, but which we think was invented by Conan Doyle: the retcon. This abbreviation stands for “retroactive continuity”, that is to say the forced inclusion of a character or event written *a posteriori* into a pre-existing canon. We are of course referring here to the well-known nemesis of Holmes, the Professor Moriarty. When this arch-villain was created by Conan Doyle in *The Final Problem*, he was meant to be used just once, meeting his match at Reichenbach and ensuring Holmes' demise. When Conan Doyle resurrected Holmes, however, it gradually dawned on him that it was a trifle strange that Holmes would have only mentioned the existence of the “Napoleon of Crime” to Watson a few months before his death, especially since, as Holmes puts it in *The Final Problem*, “[f]or years past I have continually been conscious of some power behind the malefactor, some deep organizing power which for ever stands in the way of the law, and throws its shield over the wrong-doer” (423). Consequently, Conan Doyle decided to include him in the canon, first by having Holmes mention him in passing in some stories set later (*The Adventure of the Empty House*, *The Adventure of the Norwood Builder*, *The Adventure of the Missing Three-Quarter*, *The Adventure of the Illustrious Client*, and *His Last Bow*). He ultimately decided that mentioning Moriarty after his death was not enough to really establish him as the only threat serious enough to prompt Holmes to execute him and spend three years dismantling his entire organization, and in *The Valley of Fear*, Moriarty makes another entrance. *The Valley of Fear* is set before the events of *The Final Problem*, and Moriarty does not appear directly, but his implication in the crime is discussed at length by Holmes, Watson and inspector MacDonald; while Watson and MacDonald are initially doubtful of a mathematician reigning supreme over organized crime, they ultimately side with Holmes once he has finished telling them everything he knows about Moriarty (which is, in substance, what Conan Doyle had written in *The Final Problem*). After *The Valley of Fear*, we therefore have two contradictory realities that coexist: one in which Watson is aware of the hand of Moriarty behind almost every criminal action in the country (the retconned reality) and one in which he has never heard the name of that professor of mathematics before Holmes mentions it on the third page of *The Final Problem* (the original reality). This is a conundrum which has no possible solution, contrary to the others: Watson cannot be, at the same time, aware and not

aware of Moriarty's existence. Again, the pastiche writer has to pick a side. In the case of *The House of Silk*, it would seem that the retcon is dismissed: when Watson-character meets Moriarty in chapter fourteen, he does not know his name nor his face; in the final sentence of the chapter, Watson-narrator adds that he would only see him once after that, during the events of *The Final Problem* (“And apart from one brief glimpse at Victoria Station, a year later, I never saw him again” *The House of Silk* 199). On the other hand, one could argue that the way Watson's sentence is phrased does not negate the reference to Moriarty in *The Valley of Fear*, since Holmes merely mentions his arch-nemesis by name in that novel, and the only time Watson sees Moriarty in the canon is indeed in *The Final Problem* (“Glancing back I saw a tall man pushing his way furiously through the crowd and waving his hand as if he desired to have the train stopped” *The Final Problem* 428). Moreover, Watson's secret pact with Moriarty in *The House of Silk*, according to which he is never to mention their encounter nor the very existence of the Professor to Holmes, is a convincing explanation for the apparent amnesia suffered by Watson concerning Moriarty: fearing for Holmes' safety but also aware that Holmes could uncover the whole plot if he ever suspected anything, Watson would be careful not to bring up the subject of Moriarty, and to drop it as soon as the case was dealt with.⁴⁰ In the case of *The Italian Secretary*, there is no mention of Moriarty at all (which is another way to get rid of the problem). In *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story*, as we know, Moriarty is a creation of a paranoid and drug-addicted Holmes and both *The Valley of Fear* and *The Final Problem* are therefore fabrications based on Holmes's delirium; consequently, the contradiction does not really matter, since the whole figure of Moriarty is a cover-up for Holmes's terrible crimes (we will address this issue in more details in our third part).

2] Looking for the truth or covering it up ? or Why Watson's words cannot be trusted

a) In the canon:

As we have said, the casual reader will overlook these self-contradictions, and the informed reader will probably account for them by the absence of any pre-established chronology in the writing of the tales. Truth be told, they are but minor issues, that do not prevent anyone from enjoying the canon. What is more unsettling, however, is that on several

⁴⁰ Moriarty's exact words to Watson in *The House of Silk* seem to indicate precisely that: after having boasted “I have agents in every city, every street. They are my eyes. They never so much as blink”, so that Watson knows he cannot escape his gaze, Moriarty tells Watson “You must swear on everything that is sacred to you that you will never tell Holmes, or anyone else, of that meeting. You must never write about it. You must never mention it. Should you ever hear my name, you must pretend that you are hearing it for the first time and that it means nothing to you.” (196). Of course, the very fact that the scene is present in the narrative of *The House of Silk* breaks Watson's promise, but then Watson knows that Moriarty is long dead (and Holmes is dead as well).

occasions Watson admits to have been withholding a story from the public, or changing names and places in order to avoid scandal for the parties concerned. One could argue that it is in fact dissimulation, and not openness, that is at the heart of any classic crime fiction, since the facts are always in the past and the narrator is willingly withholding data in order to create suspense; otherwise the story would be merely a newspaper report, exactly like what we have at the end of *A Study in Scarlet*.

“The public have lost a sensational treat through the death of the man Hope, who was suspected of the murder of Mr Enoch Drebber and Mr Joseph Stangerson. The details of the case will probably never be known now, though we are informed upon good authority that the crime was the result of an old-standing and romantic feud, in which love and Mormonism bore a part. It seems that both victims belonged, in their younger days, to the Latter Day Saints, and Hope, the deceased prisoner, hails also from Salt Lake City. If the case has had no other effect, it, at least, brings out in the most striking manner the efficiency of our detective police force [...]. It is an open secret that the credit of this smart apture belongs entirely to the well-known Scotland Yard officials, Messrs Lestrade and Gregson. The man was apprehended, it appears, in the rooms of a certain Mr Sherlock Holmes, who has himself, as an amateur, shown some talent in the detective line, and who, with such instructors, may hope in time to attain to some degree of their skill.” 105/6

As we can see, this report is the exact reverse of Watson's tale: not only does it lack emplotment, and even though it attempts to tease the reader with sensationalism it also fails to bring any real information on the case; moreover, it completely reverses the balance of power between Holmes and Scotland Yard. It is a gimmick in Conan Doyle's Holmes stories that newspaper reports of a case are at best lacking information, at worst utterly false; Watson's job, his mission, his purpose in life is to right their wrongs and break the true story to the reader *as it was lived by Watson himself*. Watson's approach, though more informed and interesting than that of a newspaper account (because it is filled with first-hand information), is however constantly criticized by Holmes: according to him, Watson takes liberties with the facts and with the “truth” in order to make the narrative more appealing to the reader (“I have often had occasion to point out to him how superficial are his own accounts and to accuse him to pandering to popular taste instead of confining himself rigidly to facts and figures.” *The Blanched Soldier*); therefore, Watson himself is not far from a sensational journalist. What Holmes understands, eventually, is that Watson's accounts cannot be objective and devoid of sentiments, as he himself would have it: Watson's purpose, besides that of entertaining the reader, is to make Holmes into a hero, because that is the way he (Watson) sees his friend. It is something Holmes seems to realize only after he has parted from Watson and lives in his

Sussex cottage; in *The Lion's Mane*, he laments:

“At this period of my life the good Watson had passed almost beyond my ken. An occasional week-end visit was the most I ever saw of him. Thus I must act as my own chronicler. Ah! Had he but been with me, how much he might have made of so wonderful a happening, and of my eventual triumph against every difficulty! As it is, however, I must tell my tale in my own plain way, showing by words each step upon the difficult road which lay before me as I searched for the mystery of the Lion's Mane.” 942

At last, the great scientific mind of Holmes, obsessed by facts, sees Watson's dramatization of the tales as something gained, not lost! However, this may trigger some questions in the readers' minds: if Watson's primary objective is not to report true facts, but to serve as Holmes's “Boswell”, then how far is he willing to go? Or, to put it in other words, how much have we been lied to?

Watson's attitude towards truth gradually becomes ambiguous in the mind of the reader: on first reading, he seems like a reliable narrator, and Conan Doyle intended him to be exactly that by making him both a doctor and military man, *i.e.* professions in which people trust (or trusted, at the time of the writing). On second reading, the reader becomes aware that Watson is too full of subjectivity and too keen on dramatization to be truly reliable; Holmes' remarks sometimes voice this concern, even though he eventually tolerates Watson's occasional departures from the truth because they flatter his ego as well: Watson aims at turning him into *the hero*.⁴¹ On third reading, we realize that the roots of the problem are even deeper: while apparently helping Holmes in his endless quest for truth, even in the face of adversity (in *The Final Problem*, when the brother of the late Moriarty threatens to sue him for libel, he maintains his version of events), the very process of writing the cases prove us that something else is at stake. Watson's primary concern, as we have said, is to turn Holmes into a hero; in order to do so, he has to make him memorable for the public. The very fact that he makes a selection among his notebooks of which cases to write down for publication serves as a reminder that breaking news to the public is not his goal (again, he is closer to sensationalism than to investigative journalism); furthermore, he mentions several times (*The Red-Headed League*, *The Five Orange Pips*, *The Speckled Band* and many others) that the cases he

⁴¹ Interestingly enough, Holmes does not always seem opposed to some kind of tampering with the facts: in the first chapter of *The Sign of the Four*, he actually encourages Watson to rearrange the whole story, but to a different end. Watson aims at pleasing the public and therefore places the romance between Jefferson Hope and Lucy Ferrier at the heart of his narrative within the narrative; Holmes, who as per usual does not really care about the motives behind the crime, would have had him focus on the deductive process through which the case was cracked. His words are: “Some facts should be suppressed, or, at least, a just sense of proportion should be observed in treating them. The only point in the case which deserved mention was the curious analytical reasoning from effects to causes by which I succeeded in unravelling it.” (111). This is the first of the many debates on how to properly write accounts of the tales that we can find in the canon.

chooses to publish are always those he deems the most catchy or bizarre, *ie* the most likely to show the full extent of Holmes' powers. Interestingly enough, the third short story of the canon, *A Case of Identity*, starts with a debate on the compared merits of fiction writing and police reports, during which Holmes argues that “life is infinitely stranger than anything which the mind of man could invent”, and therefore that fiction needs not be anything other than realistic. To this, Watson retorts that “realism pushed to its extreme limits [...] is [...] neither fascinating nor artistic” (both p50). While Holmes' position is clearly that of an investigator, an essentially and purely rational mind, Watson clearly sides with the fiction writers because he already considers himself one of them, thus implicitly stating that his accounts of the cases are at least partly fictionalized.⁴²

It is usually quite difficult to distinguish the elements tampered with by Watson from the “facts” of the case, except in some recurring problematic situations: when the case is too sensitive for the state (*The Second Stain*), for someone important (*The Illustrious Client*, *Charles Augustus Milverton*), or when its consequences for one of the parties involved would be too devastating, either morally or socially (*The Speckled Band*, *The Three Students* and, in a lesser way, *The Final Problem*), he cannot possibly write them down as they happened. In the canon, Watson has two different ways of dealing with situations like these: he either postpones the publication of the case -that is, more than he usually does, as in *The Speckled Band* or *The Final Problem*-; or he changes the names of the people and the places concerned in order for the reader not to recognize them, as in all the other cases aforementioned. This is surely one of Conan Doyle's best ideas in terms of narrative technique: by having Watson explicitly state that the contents of the case are confidential and that the names of the parties concerned are too famous to be put down on paper, he paradoxically reinforces the credibility of Watson's account. In *The Illustrious Client*, for example, Holmes and Watson are employed by someone who wishes to remain anonymous, but who is implied to be a member of the government (or even of the royal family); however, Watson's attitude to the truth is, as always, ambiguous when he finally becomes aware of the client's identity:

“I have found out who our client is,' I cried, bursting with my great news.
'Why, Holmes, it is——'
'It is a loyal friend and a chivalrous gentleman,' said Holmes, holding up a
restraining hand. 'Let that now and for ever be enough for us.'” 911

⁴² Holmes himself will eventually obey a similar logic when he starts writing about his solo adventures, though why he suddenly cares more about the public's interest than about the mathematical clarity of the reasoning is never explained. Has he realized that he has become a hero of a popular novel, and must therefore play along with the rules of the genre, preferring emotion, dramatization, suspense to detachment, mere facts and dry reasoning? Probably.

We can distinguish here again the two contradictory impulses in Watson: Watson as a sensational journalist, devoted to the search for the plain and whole truth, even to the point that it might cause harm (Holmes's hand, in front of Watson's outburst, is "restraining"); and Watson as a fiction author, the master of suspense and withholding of information, who eventually decides not to disclose the client's name when he puts the case down some time afterwards, because it gives more verisimilitude.

b) In the adaptations:

The genius of Conan Doyle was that he consciously used this technique not only on a fictional level, as we have already seen, but as a narrative device that helped him turn the adventures into a real canon of stories, with the repetition of patterns and motifs in the writing itself; moreover, by constantly alluding to other unwritten cases with titles that marked them immediately as holmesian adventures (the titles of all the stories in the canon follow the same simple grammatical pattern, with a few exceptions like *His Last Bow: The War Service of Sherlock Holmes*: either the name of a person/ a place, or a noun and an adjective, both usually preceded by "The Adventure of") and further adding (in the last collection of stories) that all the unwritten cases were deposited by Watson in "a travel-worn and battered tin despatch-box" "[s]omewhere in the vaults of the bank of Cox and Co., at Charing Cross" (*The Problem of Thor Bridge* 827), he gave his imitators the perfect excuse for writing more holmesian stories. We must remember first that Conan Doyle always left in the shadows parts of Holmes' and Watson's lives: very little is known about Holmes's youth and education (Watson himself seems to know as little as the reader does, since he only learns that Holmes has a brother when he meets Mycroft in the flesh in *The Greek Interpreter*); we may recall as well that in the latter days of Holmes's life, fewer cases were published by Watson so that the great detective could enjoy a retirement far from the eyes of the crowd.⁴³ In other words, Conan Doyle left enough unsaid not only to enable the readers to create stories within the story, accounting for these mysteries, but also prompted writers to take up their pens and contribute to the canon. It is no wonder if the three novels under study (and, indeed, many other adaptations) start with a foreword by the older Watson, looking back on his life and musing on all the accounts that he has not published yet: the allegedly huge number of these

⁴³ "since he has definitely retired from London and betaken himself to study and bee-farming in the Sussex Downs, notoriety has become hateful to him" *The Second Stain* 659. Interestingly enough, Watson himself gives a quite different version of this excuse in the first lines of *The Devil's Foot*, in which he links Holmes's aversion to notoriety to his mischievous spirit and his almost pathological need to always know more than the others: "To his sombre and cynical spirit all popular applause was always abhorrent, and nothing amused him more at the end of a successful case than to hand over the actual exposure to some orthodox official, and to listen with a mocking smile to the general chorus of misplaced congratulation." *The Devil's Foot* 730

unwritten cases give pastiche writers the perfect excuse for maintaining the mock-realism at the heart of any Sherlock Holmes story, where the writer would have us believe that he is merely the editor of a real manuscript by Dr. John H. Watson, MD.; for example, the first chapter of Caleb Carr's *The Italian Secretary* is preceded by an editor's note that reads: "In the interest of accommodating modern readers, the anachronistic spellings of several words used by Dr. John H. Watson have been updated." This technique also enables the writer to raise the reader's expectations and create suspense without too much effort: the fact that this new adventure of Sherlock Holmes is a posthumous publication is often exploited there, with Watson stating that he could not publish the case at the time because it would deal too much damage to the society both heroes lived in (as it is the case in Anthony Horowitz's *The House of Silk*, with its eponymous secret society of paedophiles that included members of the establishment) or to the protagonists of the novel itself (as it is the case in Michael Dibdin's *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story*, in which Watson discovers that Moriarty/Jack the Ripper is only a figment of Holmes's imagination, the great detective being the one behind the crimes); in Dibdin, Watson's narrative is preceded by three pages written by "The Editors" highlighting the whole process of how the manuscript was discovered after Watson's death, read, much debated and ultimately published, and warning the readers about the contents of the book: "There can be no question that the contents of this book will prove extremely controversial. Many people will be deeply shocked by the nature of Watson's statement" (11).

Not only did Conan Doyle prepare his own adaptations through these silences and omissions, but we could say that Watson's paradoxical unreliability as a narrator, the tension between Holmes' awareness that he has become a fictional character and Conan Doyle's insistence on verisimilitude, and the chronological inconsistencies in the canon have splendidly laid the path for neo-Victorian criticism. As a movement concerned chiefly with questions of authenticity, authorship, metafiction, and the voicing of what was silenced before, neo-Victorianism was bound to be interested in Conan Doyle's writings. Before continuing the analysis of the three neo-Victorian adaptations of the canon, we must however make one final stop in order to try and categorize a little more the different adaptations we are interested in.

3] The world of Sherlock Holmes: centred adaptations Vs. peripheral adaptations

Both the disharmony in the canon and Watson's unreliability as a narrator have fuelled endless debates among holmesian scholars and critics, as we have already seen. These debates were not confined to the spheres of literary criticism, though: they had a strong impact on the

way authors (in the wider meaning of the word: they can be playwrights, scriptwriters, directors...) chose to adapt Conan Doyle's work. If the canon itself was disunited, the adaptations are even more so, the phenomenon being further amplified by the absence of coherence stemming from the countless hands writing them. Some adaptations have nothing in common but the mention of the name "Sherlock Holmes" at one point or another.⁴⁴ Consequently, before moving on to the close analysis of the four adaptations that we have chosen to study, we need to say a few words on how to properly categorize holmesian adaptations. It would be impossible for us to take into consideration the whole of the production, let alone analyse it -as Thomas Leitch reminds us, there have been more adaptations of the canon than of Tarzan, Dracula and Jekyll & Hyde together, and he is only speaking here of film adaptations-. On the other hand, it would seem that the whole the holmesian adaptations (a term which, as we have mentioned in our introduction, includes sequels, pastiches and other hypertextual endeavours) can be roughly divided into two categories: what we could call *centred adaptations* and *peripheral adaptations*.⁴⁵ These two categories stem from an apparent paradox, in Conan Doyle's writing, that we have already mentioned: Holmes and Watson are not fixed characters, in the sense that their adventures were never given a proper ending and that there are still many things readers of the canon ignore about them (even though Conan Doyle wrote more than sixty stories, for a period over thirty years), yet they quickly turned into iconic characters and became part of mass culture. One could argue, of course, that it is precisely because their adventures were never given a proper ending and because so little is known about the two characters that they became so popular, as it made any attempt at writing after Conan Doyle (or against Conan Doyle) much easier; this is not our point here. What we want to show is that there are two categories of adaptations of the canon, each based on one of the two propositions that form this apparent paradox.

The first kind of adaptations, which probably contains more than half of the whole production (this is a rough estimation, again), consists of texts that follow the tradition of the canon insofar as they take Holmes and Watson as main characters.⁴⁶ However radical and

⁴⁴ One can compare, for example, Anthony Horowitz's 2014 novel *Moriarty* with the 1939 film *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (with Basil Rathbone), or Carole Nelson Douglas' 1990 novel *Good Night, Mr. Holmes* with Bill Condon's 2015 film *Mr. Holmes* (based on Mitch Cullin's 2005 novel *A Slight Trick of the Mind*).

⁴⁵ Obviously, we are fully aware that this distinction is artificial, and that there are probably quite a few exceptions that could fit in both categories. However, for our purpose here, this initial distinction is necessary; since we will only be dealing with a handful of centred adaptations, the reader will forgive us for this expedited process.

⁴⁶ "texts" is taken here in the wider linguistic sense; it can concern actual texts (narratives), but also texts mixed with images (comic books, *bandes dessinées* or graphic novels), spoken texts (radio adaptations), acted texts (theatre) or films.

iconoclastic their approaches to Conan Doyle's canon may be, they take as a starting point and often as main focus of the action the dynamic duo. We could again divide this category into at least two sub-categories: what we could call *direct adaptations* (the translation of an original text of the canon into another medium, for example the 1939 film *The Hound of the Baskervilles* with Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce), and *indirect adaptations* (“new” adventures of Holmes and Watson, be they sequels, prequels, etc. or combinations of several canonical texts to form new ones, like the 2010 series *Sherlock* for example). Obviously, direct adaptations are much less numerous than indirect adaptations. We have chose to label this category “centred” adaptations because they not only take the canon as a starting point but relate to it and resonate with it in the way they present their versions of Holmes and Watson (and often of the secondary characters that accompany them). They may challenge all of what Conan Doyle wrote about either of the characters, but they do not challenge their statuses as main protagonists of the texts, even though they may sometimes enhance the importance of a character who, in the canon, is completely secondary (for example, the series of *bande dessinées Holmes (1854/ 1891?)*, by Cecil and Brunschwig, has Watson team up with a secondary character of the canon, Wiggins, in order to understand the circumstances behind Holmes' demise at the Reichenbach Falls; consequently, Holmes is hardly present at all, and Watson is as present as Wiggins, but the series still focuses on Holmes). Clearly, the texts that belong to this category are texts that seek to provide an answer to the questions left open by Conan Doyle, or a satisfying conclusion (as far as their author is concerned, at least) to the contradictions present in the canon.

We will not be analysing any text that belongs to the second kind of adaptations in this research, but as far as terminology and clarity are concerned, we do need to explain what it contains. When the first category of adaptations was mainly focused on the canon throughout the adaptive process (the texts it contained resonated with the original texts by Conan Doyle), the adaptations in the second category merely take it as a starting point: they capitalize on Holmes's and Watson's statuses as icons of popular culture, and are set in “the world of Holmes and Watson”. The heroic duo can however be nothing more than a pretext to introduce a new detective, be it a secret apprentice of Holmes's, or Lestrade, or Mycroft, or even Mrs Hudson (among others). Unlike direct adaptations, in which the notion of homage can be problematic if the adaptation really challenges the canon, these adaptations need Holmes and Watson to be icons because it legitimises the adaptation (writing stories about the investigations of a landlady takes on another dimension altogether if this landlady is Mrs Hudson, because it will conjure up in the reader memories and images of the world of Holmes

and Watson). We have chosen to label this category “peripheral” adaptations because even though they take the canon as a starting point, they drift away very quickly and revolve around it at a safe distance, often without really engaging any direct confrontation with Conan Doyle's words. Moreover, these adaptations are at times quite indiscriminate in their choice of traditions: their Holmes and Watson are not necessarily the original characters created by Conan Doyle, but rather their patchwork counterparts that are present in popular culture.

In this research paper, we have chosen to focus on centred adaptations rather than on peripheral adaptations because we think that they conjure up interesting questions of ownership, homage, iconoclasm and hypertextuality (more than peripheral adaptations do); consequently, most of them (and, indeed, the three under study) can be truly labelled “neo-Victorian fictions”. On the other hand, in peripheral adaptations, since the canon is more often than not a starting point, the historical context can be discarded easily as well, and therefore the analysis might not be equally interesting in terms of neo-Victorian criticism.⁴⁷ Armed with these critical tools, we may now turn to an analysis of the three different adaptations under study, in categories that are, this time, quite simple: we shall begin with the official perspective on Conan Doyle's legacy, and its literary embodiment in *The House of Silk* (Anthony Horowitz); then, we will turn to Caleb Carr's *The Italian Secretary* as another holmesian adaptation (or appropriation) approved of by Conan Doyle Estate, Ltd., but already quite different; we will then come to Michael Dibdin's *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story* (and its graphic novel adaptation by Olivier Cotte and Jules Stromboni), a piece of fiction that strays from the official perspective on Conan Doyle, to see whether or not it really is less doylean than the other two.

B) The continuing story of Holmes and Watson

1] Different ways of taking up Conan Doyle's mantle #1: Horowitz and the “official” perspective

Maurice Leblanc, in his article written on the day of Conan Doyle's death (“Les méthodes de Sherlock Holmes”), stresses the fact that the holmesian canon is composed of types and patterns that do not vary much. The plot unravels more or less always in a similar way: Watson describes a regular day at 221B, a client arrives and explains his situation,

⁴⁷ This opposition between centred adaptations supposedly more neo-Victorian and peripheral adaptations more akin to historical romances needs, however, to be nuanced: sometimes, it is precisely by stepping away from the canon that a neo-Victorian awareness is born. We can think of *The House at Baker Street: A Mrs Hudson and Mary Watson Investigation* by Michelle Birkby, or the *Mary Russel* series by Laurie R. King, in which the author focuses on female perspectives and voices that were repressed during the Victorian era. Again, this ambiguity shows how difficult it is to theorize, when one attempts to take into account a cultural production that important.

Holmes and Watson leave to investigate, Watson and the police are perplex whereas Holmes is being mysterious, the truth is finally revealed to the bafflement of Watson/ the police/ the client, and this is it, so to speak. Similarly, the secondary characters are all interchangeable because they are functions more than actual characters: all the clients are similar, all the police officers are similar, all the small-time villains are similar; they have no depth, no psychological background (even Holmes and Watson scarcely have one). There are, of course, exceptions (Stanley Hopkins for the police, Charles Augustus Milverton for the villains...) but on the whole, Conan Doyle is quite the enemy of variation.

Taking this into consideration, it seems fairly logical that the first acknowledged Holmes sequel should in fact be written by one of Conan Doyle's sons, with the help of American crime writer and first official Conan Doyle biographer John Dickson Carr.⁴⁸ This is very interesting because it shows very early on an attempt to control Conan Doyle's legacy on the part of Conan Doyle's family, allegedly more fit to write about Holmes and Watson than outsiders (and already a failure, since they had to call for the help of an outsider, and also since the book did not sell well). As it happens, the stories that make up *The Exploits of Sherlock Holmes* (published in 1954) have a direct origin in the canon: they all derive their titles from cases Watson alluded to in passing, but that were never written by Conan Doyle; in other words, each story in the collection is inspired by a quote from one of the original Sherlock Holmes stories, making reference to an undocumented Holmes case, and the quote is put in appendix. That is to say, for example, that the plot of *The Adventure of the Deptford Horror* (present in *The Exploits*) is inspired by a quote from *The Adventure of Black Peter* (present in *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*), in which Watson mentions “the arrest of Wilson, the notorious canary-trainer, which removed a plague-spot from the East-End of London.” (p.539); Wilson becomes, in *The Deptford Horror*, a criminal, link to a streak of apparently natural deaths of heart failure. It is interesting to note that, even here, when the intention was clearly to complete the canon and to pay homage to Conan Doyle without challenging his creation at all, the writers took some liberties with the original text: if we go back to the example of *The Deptford Horror*, Wilson disappears but is implied to have died; according to Watson's one-sentence account of the case in *Black Peter*, on the other hand, Wilson was arrested by the police at the end of the case. This discrepancy is interesting because it shows that Adrian Conan Doyle seemed to share his father's detachment from the idea of a rigid,

⁴⁸ It was probably mostly written by John Dickson Carr, more or less under the supervision of Adrian Conan Doyle. In fact, as Carr's biographer has shown, the collaboration was not smooth between the two. Moreover, anyone who has read enough original works by Carr cannot fail to spot his style from time to time in this collection.

definitive and fixed canon, and considered that a writer had to worry less about contradicting himself than about creating a good story.

That first official sequel set a precedent: from then on, there would be some holmesian adaptations that were approved of by Conan Doyle's heirs, and some that would not. We have chosen to work on Dibdin, Horowitz and Carr in this paper because each represents a different attitude of Conan Doyle's heirs: Dibdin did not have the official approval, Carr had it, and Horowitz was chosen by Conan Doyle Estate, Ltd. to write a new Holmes story (that was even presented as the official continuation of the canon). Conan Doyle Estate, Ltd. is therefore an force to be reckoned with in terms of holmesian adaptations. However, it is possible that they may be biased in their choices of which book to endorse, since their main concern is to preserve Conan Doyle's legacy and characters: consequently, they are often quite timid and tend to back the least explicitly controversial adaptations (which is absolutely not the case in Dibdin, for example). One could argue that the official approval of the Conan Doyle family would narrow the freedom of the author, or even negate the possibility to write a true neo-Victorian novel, since it would prevent one from really challenging Conan Doyle's legacy. We will have to address this issue when we analyse Horowitz and Carr in more details.

Since Horowitz's *The House of Silk* is the first book ever to be officially presented as the continuation of the canon by Conan Doyle Estate, Ltd, we can expect it to be a wholehearted homage to Conan Doyle, with all the *topoi* of the canon. In this respect, Horowitz does not disappoint and everything is present: after a foreword by an older Watson explaining that the case was never published before because it was too scandalous for the times, the plot unravels, with Holmes's trademark irony, Watson as an unfailing sidekick, Mrs Hudson in the background and Mycroft not very far, a baffled police (with Inspector Lestrade), a puzzling mystery (or, rather, mysteries), memorable characters (especially the villains, with of course Moriarty making a surprise entrance around the middle of the book), suspense, hansoms, guns, “the game is afoot”, the Baker Street Irregulars, a darker atmosphere (such as it could be found in Conan Doyle's latter stories), and a final revelation that re-establishes Holmes's status as the paragon of the detective. While it clearly brands *The House of Silk* as an homage to Conan Doyle's entire canon, this overwhelming amount of details, references and allusions is perhaps a trifle awkward: for the casual reader, they will not necessarily ring any bells and will be overlooked most of the time; for the Holmes aficionado, who knows perfectly well that Conan Doyle had little sense of what we could call *canonicity* or *canon-making* (for example, he never used a secondary character twice, apart from Mycroft and one or two police inspectors), this all seems too much for a “true” holmesian story, as if Horowitz had

attempted to synthesize not only the whole canon but the legacy of adaptations as well into one single novel. It is quite clear indeed that Horowitz's inspiration derives as much from the traditions of holmesian adaptations as from the canon itself: that he chose to put Mycroft (whose part could have been cut off), Moriarty (whose intervention is, narratively speaking, useless), Lestrade (instead of any other police officer) or the Baker Street Irregulars in the novel, and the way he used them is clearly indebted to popular culture.⁴⁹

But perhaps have we been taking the wrong critical perspective on *The House of Silk* by assuming it to be the continuation of Conan Doyle's entire canon. Indeed, the caption "The new Sherlock Holmes novel" that is printed above the title on the front page can be understood in two different ways: either as 'the latest instalment in the Sherlock Holmes series', which is what we have assumed, in which sense the book is not really convincing; or as 'a novel with a new take on Sherlock Holmes' (a 'new take' which is nonetheless closely linked to the old tradition, since it is backed by Conan Doyle Estate, Ltd.). This second interpretation changes everything for our analysis: if *The House of Silk* is meant to be a new perspective on the canon, then it is perfectly normal that it should be riddled with references; if its aim is to entice readers to read or re-read the canon, it is perfectly logical that it should allude to all the key episodes that marked the heroic duo's career (Holmes's and Watson's first meeting, and Watson's marriage, are referenced to in the preface; Holmes's death and resurrection are hinted at through the presence of Moriarty chapter fourteen; his retirement in Sussex -and, ultimately, his death of old age- is mentioned both in the preface and the last chapter) as well as to all the *topoi* and characters we have listed before, and many cases of the canon (*The Sign of the Four*, *The Dying Detective*, *The Greek Interpreter*...). On the whole, it would seem that Horowitz's *The House of Silk* can be both seen as a "compression" and a "proximation" of Conan Doyle's canon, to use Julie Sanders' words in *Adaptation and Appropriation*. The label "compression" is quite obvious: even though *The House of Silk* is an original novel, it includes all the key elements present in the holmesian canon (and some that have been added by the adaptive traditions) in not more than 294 pages, hence the impression that the novel is, at times, on the verge of explosion. Horowitz's aim is explicitly to make that novel a pastiche of the whole of the canon; implicitly, his inclusion of some non-canonical elements or the importance given to some fan-favourite characters (Moriarty, Mycroft, the Irregulars...) could also be seen as a way to appeal to those who discovered Holmes and

⁴⁹ The Baker Street Irregulars are, as we will see, at the heart of the novel; their presence is consequently not a whim of the author. However, one could argue that the very fact of putting children at the heart of a holmesian adventure, like this, is definitely not something Conan Doyle ever did, and is therefore more indebted to popular culture as well.

Watson through other means than the original stories, and who only have a limited knowledge of the canon. In that sense, we could say that Horowitz's book is indeed a "proximation" as well, if his aim is to bring the readers of the 21st century closer to a text written at the end of the 19th, by bridging the contextual gap between the two moments; incidentally, as we will examine later on, *The House of Silk* becomes more than a Conan Doyle pastiche and echoes other 19th-century writers (especially Dickens) in the author's attempt to make the reader familiar with the spatial and temporal context of the canon (that is Conan Doyle's vision of Victorian Britain). By straying away from a purely holmesian adaptation, Horowitz not only becomes a truly neo-Victorian writer, as he shows his awareness of what is missing in Conan Doyle's prose to enable a 21st-century reader to understand and enjoy it; he also celebrates by contrast what is truly original and innovative in Conan Doyle's creation; the blurb on the back cover is pretty explicit here: "With devilish plotting and excellent characterization, bestselling author Anthony Horowitz delivers a first-rate Sherlock Holmes mystery for a modern readership while remaining utterly true to the spirit of the original Conan Doyle books." Much like the famous caption that introduced every Rathbone and Bruce film in the 1940s, the purpose is both to underline the adaptation's faithfulness to "the spirit of the original Conan Doyle books" (whatever that means), and to capitalize on all the innovations it brings about.⁵⁰ This may seem like a paradoxical attitude, but let us not forget that while the name of Anthony Horowitz was sure to appeal to a young public that did not necessarily know much about the canon, Conan Doyle Estate, Ltd (and the editors of *The House of Silk*) needed to secure the interest of the holmesian critics and fans: the reference to "the spirit of the original Conan Doyle books" can therefore be understood, even though it relies on the somewhat erroneous idea that there is an objective essence of the holmesian canon that can be either followed or betrayed.

Nonetheless, we need to keep in mind that the term "proximation" is used by Julie Sanders (who coined it, as far as we know) in quite a different way: in her *Adaptation and Appropriation*, it is more or less a synonym of "updating".⁵¹ However, it seems to us that the idea of a "proximation" is not only temporal, and that the word contains both the ideas of

⁵⁰ The caption read: "Sherlock Holmes, the immortal character of fiction created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, is ageless, invincible and unchanging. In solving significant problems of the present day he remains -as ever- the supreme master of deductive reasoning." (cf. *Sherlock Holmes and the Voice of Terror*)

⁵¹ Julie Sanders quotes Baz Luhrmann's 1996 *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet*, which transposes the plot in modern-day New York, and Michael Almereyda's 2000 *Hamlet*, transforming Elsinore into a New York corporation and Hamlet into a film student. Closer to our subject here, we could refer to the ongoing BBC series *Sherlock*, relocating Holmes and Watson to 21st-century London, or even the 1940s Rathbone & Bruce film series, that updated Conan Doyle's adventures to the then-contemporary context of World War Two. There are many more examples of this process among holmesian adaptations.

bringing the public closer to a work of art and bringing a work of art closer to the public (whereas an updating would correspond only to the latter). Julie Sanders does not dwell on this ambiguity, though she must be aware of it; for us, the idea of “proximation” is rather more interesting than that of “updating” since neither of the three books under study is an explicit updating, unlike the examples Sanders quotes. We must only remember that, according to Julie Sanders's terminology, *The House of Silk* is not a proximation, while according to ours, it is clearly one, as any reader can tell.

Let us follow this train of thoughts to its logical conclusion: with its constant emphasis on proximation (rather than updating), its overwhelming number of references to the canon, and its official approval by the most zealous worshippers of “the spirit of the original Conan Doyle books”, Anthony Horowitz's intentions when he wrote *The House of Silk* were clearly to create the perfect introduction to the holmesian canon for 21st-century readers. Except, perhaps, for the character of Dr. Trevelyan, it seems to us that the passing allusions to other canonical cases are understood as such only when the reader has a prior knowledge of the canon, and do not get in the way of the enjoyment and overall understanding of the plot by a new reader;⁵² this is probably because Horowitz made sure to focus its case on entirely new characters and plots -apart from those whose names have passed, along with Holmes' and Watson's, into popular culture (like Moriarty, Mycroft or even Lestrade). Consequently, like most of Conan Doyle's original tales, *The House of Silk* can be read as a standalone story, nonetheless enticing the reader to (re-)read the canon in order to grasp all the private jokes and on-the-side references. Moreover, by choosing not to write about Holmes's last investigation (unlike what Dibdin did) and setting the scene in London at some point during Holmes's career (unlike what Carr did), Horowitz imitated Conan Doyle's disregard for precise chronology, making sure that his case could be read as an introduction or at any point during the discovery of the canon.⁵³

Horowitz's own words, in an interview given for the BBC News website, seem to point in this very direction: his first ideas for *The House of Silk* included “a number of rules: his

⁵² Dr. Trevelyan is the prison doctor in *The House of Silk*; he is immediately sympathetic to Holmes' safety and convinced of his innocence. Though their previous meeting (in *The Adventure of the Resident Patient*) is eventually referred to by Watson, only those who have read the case understand fully his gratitude to Holmes and why he immediately helps Holmes escape when he learns of the plan to murder him by passing it off as an accident.

⁵³ When we speak of “Conan Doyle's disregard for precise chronology”, we mean that except for a handful of cases in Holmes' career (the first two, Holmes' death and return, and three cases taking place after Holmes' retirement), they can be read in any order. This is also what we mean when we speak of Conan Doyle's mock-realism: even though the settings appear to be realistic, with many details of city life at the end of the 19th century, nothing seems to change; there is no precise reference to the different governments, to the social movements of the time, to the construction of the subway, to the many architectural transformations in the city... The only variations in the landscape of London, in Sherlock Holmes, seem to be the climate.

story would be narrated by Watson, there would be no romance, no attempts to re-write Conan Doyle's universe, and no appearances by famous people.” Of all these rules, the most important are obviously the last two, because they betray Horowitz's post-modern, neo-Victorian awareness while at the same time trying to repress it: if he states right from the start that he will not re-write Conan Doyle, it is precisely because he is trying to write a new Sherlock Holmes adventure as if nothing had happened in the literary world between the 1920s and the 2010s. In that sense, *The House of Silk* would be more of a pastiche and a prequel than an adaptation or appropriation, at least in Horowitz's mind. As we will see later on, Horowitz proved a little naive if he genuinely thought he could suppress all trace of neo-Victorianism and post-modernism from his narrative, even though he did an excellent job as a pastiche writer.

2] Different ways of taking up Conan Doyle's mantle #2: Caleb Carr, the Heir to the Baskervilles?

We must recall first that Caleb Carr was already known to the reading public for creating another heroic duo of investigators at the end of the 19th century, Laszlo Kreizler and John Moore, the heroes of *The Alienist* and *The Angel of Darkness*, when he published his take on Holmes and Watson in 2005. Moreover, in a similar way as Horowitz, he was in fact asked by Conan Doyle Estate, Ltd (through one of their American representative, John Lellenberg) to write what was originally meant to be a short story for the collection *The Ghosts in Baker Street: New Tales of Sherlock Holmes*. As the title indicates, and as Lellenberg makes it clear in the afterword to *The Italian Secretary*, the aim of the collection was explicitly for the invited authors “to give Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson new adventures that would be supernatural in theme and tone.” (272). Interestingly enough, Lellenberg goes on, saying that “it was undeniably [...] taking liberty with [Arthur Conan Doyle's] most famous literary character. But [...] I was able to give us permission to proceed nevertheless, with *The Hound of the Baskervilles* as excuse and inspiration.” (*ibid.*, 273). There are two major ideas in this sentence: first, that Conan Doyle Estate, Ltd does not approve of authors taking liberty with Holmes and Watson, something that we had inferred but not proven in the previous sub-part; now if Lellenberg himself, who is an inside man, writes it down, it is proof enough for us. The second idea is that *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (described as Holmes's “most famous adventure” by Lellenberg) is to be the one and only canonical example of supernatural in the adventures of Sherlock Holmes, and consequently the ultimate guideline for the author who wishes to pit Holmes against the

mysterious forces beyond the realm of men. That *The Hound of the Baskervilles* is the only case blending rationality and the supernatural is simply not true (one can think of *The Sussex Vampire*, or *The Creeping Man* as striking examples) but it is nonetheless the only case that, because of its tone and of its length, conjures up and capitalizes on a Gothic atmosphere that even Holmes's rational explanations at the end cannot fully dispel. We can see already that *The House of Silk* and *The Italian Secretary*, despite being both commissioned by Conan Doyle Estate, Ltd., have very different approaches to the canon: while Horowitz had strict orders from the editors (a novel of “95,000 words”, as he indicates in the interview we have quoted before) and was probably kept under close watch by Conan Doyle's heirs, Carr managed to escape almost all the rules that he initially had to cope with. *The Italian Secretary* was supposed to be a short story, it turned into a 261-pages novel; it was supposed to follow in the footsteps of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, its first chapter borrows heavily from another novel of the canon (*The Valley of Fear*); it was supposed to be a new Holmes adventure, it could be argued that it is a neo-Victorian rewriting of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* more than anything else. Then again, each novel has a different “ideal reader” in mind: we have already identified Horowitz's as a (young) adult that enjoys popular literature in general and who is not necessarily a connoisseur of Conan Doyle's canon. Carr, on the other hand, has never written but for an adult public (the tone and atmosphere of *The Alienist* are definitely darker and more mature than those of almost any book by Horowitz); moreover, he is regularly praised for the intricacy of his plots and the complexity of his psychological descriptions, and is known for his non-fiction scholarly writings (he is a military historian); to top it all, as we have said, the book was meant as a variation on *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Carr's ideal reader is therefore clearly an adult, with a good knowledge of the canon, an interest in history, and someone who is ready to see Conan Doyle's rational universe challenged by phenomena that might be beyond even Holmes's powers of explanation. Even before analysing Carr's book, we can already say that it is likely to be more neo-Victorian than Horowitz's.

In spite of Carr's background as a historian, and of the novel's title that refers to a well-known episode in Scottish history, we would be wrong to categorize *The Italian Secretary* a historical fiction. Even though Carr sets his novel in a firm temporal, spatial and political context right from the start, with allusions to Victoria's health or to the threat embodied by the Kaiser and his spies on the one hand, and by Scottish separatists on the other hands, all these considerations eventually prove to be false clues left by the real criminals (and by the writer himself); the present of 19th-century London gradually gives way to the past of 16th-century

Scotland, as Holmes and Watson have to face an increasingly invasive return of history (first the two murders that mimic the death of David Rizzio, then a bloodstain “that never dries”, a singing yet mournful ghost, and even a besieged Holyroodhouse with a catapult hurling fire at them in the last few chapters). In historical fiction, “the time period is an important part of the setting and often of the story itself” because the aim of the narrative is to allow the reader to live a given time period (in the past) through the eyes of characters;⁵⁴ the remote historical past (for the reader) is turned into the present of the characters, often in order to make another discourse on that period emerge (the suppressed voices of the lower classes/ slaves/ women, for example). In *The Italian Secretary*, Carr quickly gets rid of the contemporary 19th-century context, because he is much more interested in the protagonists' relationship to an already distant past and the problems it can create (whereas historical fiction, though it may challenge an established discourse on a historical event, rarely questions our ability to know and understand the past); in doing so, he is close to *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, which was already a novel about how the past can be misinterpreted, and how this misinterpretation can have dramatic consequences (as we will see, Holmes' rational explanation for the presence of ghosts in both novels ends the misinterpretation and rids the characters of a past that was becoming a burden, enabling them to finally live in the present). Consequently, and despite the meeting between Holmes, Watson, Mycroft and the very real Queen Victoria in one chapter, *The Italian Secretary* is not a historical novel but a novel about history and our relation to it.

We have said that *The Hound of the Baskervilles* was more than “excuse and inspiration” for Carr, even going so far as to label *The Italian Secretary* a neo-Victorian appropriation of what is arguably Conan Doyle's masterpiece. Indeed, Carr's book differs greatly from Horowitz's in its system of references to the canon: where Horowitz's aim was to use every character and case that were at his disposal (an artistic move that was in-keeping with Conan Doyle Estate, Ltd.'s intention to make the canon appear more appealing and accessible to a new audience), Carr narrowed the range of his allusions but used them more thoroughly, placing them at the heart both of his narration and his plot. One could argue that a reader who would not know *The Hound of the Baskervilles* would miss the point of *The Italian Secretary*, as it is very much Carr's answer, as a neo-Victorian to Conan Doyle's Victorian Gothic novel. For now, we will focus on the similarities between the two, and we will discuss the idea of Carr writing back at Conan Doyle in our third part. In topic, *The*

⁵⁴ This definition of the genre of historical fiction comes from the website Goodreads. We will later use two other definitions which problematize the term, one by Dana Shiller and the other by Michael Benton, when we analyse Carr's book into more details.

Italian Secretary is very similar to its predecessor: as we have said, it pits Holmes and (mostly) Watson against an apparently supernatural being, this time the blood-thirsty ghost of David Rizzio. As in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Holmes and Watson are forced to step out of their comfort zone, the modern and apparently rational city of London, into Scotland and more precisely Holyroodhouse, a place thrice remote: in the spatial sense (obviously), in the temporal sense (it was built in the middle ages, like Baskerville Hall), and in the cultural sense (the belief in ghosts is more common, and the question of nationalism is an important one). The plot structure is pretty similar in the two novels as well, with a series of suspicious deaths prompting someone to ask Holmes for help, several false leads being followed, and the main antagonist ultimately meeting his demise with a touch of dramatic irony (in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Stapleton died in the moors where he kept the dog he used to terrorise the Baskervilles; in *The Italian Secretary*, Lord Francis Hamilton is burned to death because he attempted to blow up the castle gate but lacked knowledge of explosives, a detail the reader already knows); the part played by the servants' couple is pretty similar as well (Watson initially suspects them of being criminals but it proves, in fact, to be yet another false lead and they eventually help him). The only exception is perhaps that Carr has Holmes accompany Watson to Scotland whereas, in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, the good doctor was left alone for the most part of the book; this is balanced by the fact that Carr, in the narrative, relies heavily on Watson's perception (like Conan Doyle did) but also makes him a much more active character than in most of the canon (the scene at the *Fife and Drum* is a very good example of that). The tone is very similar as well, since both adventures rely on Watson having to find explanations and answers alone (in *The Italian Secretary*, though Holmes is present, he saves his explanations for the end of the novel) and borrow heavily from the Gothic genre: the landscape is similarly gloomy, although *The Hound of the Baskervilles* gives more prominence to the wild and unwelcoming nature of the moors, while *The Italian Secretary* focuses on the awesome architecture of Holyroodhouse (especially the West Tower, that is supposed to be renovated at the beginning of the book but stands as a reminder of a macabre past). What is interesting, though, is that there is but one explicit reference to *The Hound of the Baskervilles* in Carr's book, when Holmes compares Lord Francis Hamilton (the main antagonist) to Stapleton:

“Lord Francis is among the best of his criminal type that we have encountered together. You will recall the man who called himself Stapleton, some years ago?”
‘Of course,’ I replied. ‘The Baskerville case.’
‘Indeed. A comparable example – although I suspect that Lord Francis is Stapleton's superior in raw physical strength’” 183

What is interesting about this reference is that not only is it the sole direct mention of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, but also the fact that it is only done in passing, like all other mentions made by either Holmes or Watson of previous cases. Though the parallels between the two novels are the key to understand fully Carr's narrative, they are never obvious: this mention of Stapleton is neither the first reference to a canonical story made in the book (*Charles Augustus Milverton* is mentioned as early as the second chapter, p.10) nor the first time the novel's villain is compared to a previous antagonist (Baron Gruner and his influence upon young women is discussed quite thoroughly p.155/6). This, more than anything else perhaps, proves our point: to a reader who knows the canon, the parallels between *The Italian Secretary* and *The Hound of the Baskervilles* are quite obvious; to a reader who does not, this is just one reference among others. In other words, while these many parallels are clearly meant to pay homage to Conan Doyle's original story, it is safe to say that any reader unfamiliar with *The Hound of the Baskervilles* would not understand most of them; in fact, they would probably not even be detected as references. Consequently, Carr represents a tradition of holmesian adaptations that is different from that to which *The House of Silk* belongs: *The Italian Secretary* has been approved of by Conan Doyle Estate, Ltd., but when Horowitz put himself in Conan Doyle's shoes and wrote a piece of popular fiction that would be immediately enjoyable by anyone, Carr wrote a more high-brow variation on Conan Doyle's work that could be read and fully enjoyed by insiders only.

3] Different ways of taking up Conan Doyle's mantle #3: Michael Dibdin's *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story* & its graphic counterpart

a) Michael Dibdin in context: the 1970s, a dark time for Holmes

We have already mentioned that deconstruction was a key concept in neo-Victorianism; its expression is nonetheless quite mild in *The House of Silk* and *The Italian Secretary*: Watson has merely left a case out of the canon, allegedly because the world was not ready for it yet, and has decided to write it some years later for readers with more experience and temporal distance from the events. This idea originates in the canon itself, as we have seen, mostly with the example of *The Speckled Band*, and is a way of teasing the reader: when he reads the story, he will become part of the lucky few who share the secret of what happened; he, like Watson, is given the explanation for what otherwise seemed a mystery, but a mystery even more mysterious (so to speak) than the other mysteries that are explained in the rest of the canon. However, *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story* uses quite a different starting point:

there is this notion of secret as well, and of truth being finally revealed, but both come after the central notion of lie. Indeed, in the first pages of *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story*, we learn that at least two cases written by Watson (*The Final Problem*, and *The Empty House*) were outright forgeries, cover-ups for a secret for which the readers were not ready yet: as we see, these two ideas pop up again, but the one that is central to the narrative and to Dibdin's position *vis-à-vis* Conan Doyle is the uncovering of the truth behind the accepted lies of the canon. Again, ironically, this idea comes from the canon itself: in several cases, usually the ones that involve members of the government or of the royal family, Watson tells the reader that he is either changing the names/ dates/ nationalities of the characters, or omitting them altogether, in order not to damage their reputation (again): *The Second Stain*, for example.

Even though we shall be focusing our study on Dibdin and its adaptation into a graphic novel, we must not take *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story* out of its context. The 1970s and 1980s, in literature and cinema, were years of systematic deconstruction of the holmesian canon: we can think of *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* (film, Billy Wilder, 1970), *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution* (1974 novel by Nicholas Meyer, 1976 film), *Murder By Decree* (film, 1979, Bob Clark), *Sherlock Holmes* (series with Jeremy Brett, started in 1984), *Without a Clue* (film, 1988, Thom Eberhardt)... All those books and films challenge the canon and the traditional representations of Holmes and Watson, though rarely as straight-forwardly as Dibdin does. The tone is usually that of a comedy, even when they deal with darker aspects of Holmes' personality, present but repressed in the canon (drug addiction in *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution*, possible homosexuality in *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*). Some of those works are presented as “new” Holmes adventures (*The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*, *Murder by Decree*...); others, like Dibdin's book, are presented as the “truth” behind the forgeries that either Conan Doyle or Watson (or both, in some cases) came up with (*The Seven-Per-Cent Solution* and the other two books by Nicholas Meyer, *Without a Clue*...). We have chose to include in this list the Granada series *Sherlock Holmes*, with Jeremy Brett: even though it consists of “faithful” (that was said at the times) adaptations of Conan Doyle's stories (one episode for one case), Jeremy Brett's Holmes is considerably darker than Conan Doyle's, and arguably closer to Dibdin's (in *L'ultime défi de Sherlock Holmes*, the adaptation of Dibdin's book into a graphic novel, the two authors have chose to model Holmes after Jeremy Brett). The two adaptations that are completely devoid of humour are Dibdin's and Bob Clark's 1979 film *Murder By Decree*, both having Holmes face Jack the Ripper: in these two works, the usually light atmosphere of the canon is replaced with a much darker one; Holmes's benevolent irony is more acid; and the relations between Holmes and secondary

characters (mostly the police) are very tense.

Interestingly enough, the extract from one review of *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story* that features on the back cover runs: “A horrible thread of reality runs through the tale as it does in no other Sherlock Holmes story, for the Whitechapel murders were real!” (*Baltimore Sun*). Though that critic seems to forget (willingly?) the enormous number of Holmes VS the Ripper stories, he is right in his analysis of the effect produced on the reader by this invasion of reality into the realm of fiction: we, as readers, know right from the start that Holmes will at least partially fail in bringing Jack the Ripper to justice, that is to say that either the Ripper will die or the whole case will be hushed up, because in reality the Ripper was never caught. In that particular case, more than in any canonical ones, the real world (or rather 19th-century history) is a part of the reader's horizon of aspirations from the start of the book; consequently, Dibdin capitalizes on the reader's awareness of the historical details of the Ripper case (the several letters and the debates over their authorship, the description of the bodies, the tag incriminating “Juwes” [sic.] that was erased by the police) perhaps even more than on their knowledge of the holmesian canon. Moreover, there have been so many theories about the Ripper murders, so many books of fiction and non-fiction trying to solve the mystery, that he has gradually become a figure of the collective imagination, a myth, identifiable only by those details we have already mentioned and without a fixed identity; a sort of evil incarnate that was so much beyond the society of his times that he could never have been caught. While this gave rise to many conspiracy theories (a secret society of murderers, Freemasons on a rampage, or even a plot to get rid of the duke of Clarence's bastard son), it also offers a good parallel with Holmes, “born” at the same time, and who was a fictional character so important and so vivid that he became, in a sense, real; consequently, the idea that Holmes would have been the only one to be able to catch the Ripper, had he really existed, emerged in the minds of many writers.

One could therefore think of *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story* as a historical fiction, but that analysis would not cover the complexity of the novel: the dimension of verisimilitude and even realism in the depiction of London in 1888 or in the precision of the details on the Ripper murders must not let us forget the fact that this is, first and foremost, a holmesian adaptation. Consequently, as well-documented as it may be, its aim is not to show the reader “famous events [appearing] from points of view not recorded in history” (Goodreads) but to have Watson tell a story about Holmes and he – a story *inspired* by true events, but *necessarily fictional*, because in a plot twist the Ripper is revealed to be none other than Holmes himself. Again, one must consider the influence of the artistic context on Dibdin's story: many

holmesian adaptations of the 1970s, in books or for the screen, were historical fictions. Among those already mentioned, we have *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* (with an appearance made by Queen Victoria), *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution* (in which Sigmund Freud is a major character), and *Murder by Decree* (another variation on the Ripper murders in which Donald Sutherland plays Robert James Lees and John Gieguld, Lord Salisbury).

b) Olivier Cotte and Jules Stromboni: back to sensationalism?

Concerning the graphic novel counterpart to Dibdin's novel, what is interesting is that it was created by two French authors of *bandes dessinées*, Olivier Cotte and Jules Stromboni, none of whom had made any previous incursion into the realm of holmesian adaptations. Furthermore, it was published in 2010, more than thirty years after the novel came out, and Michael Dibdin had died in the meantime (in 2007). Again, we must not lose sight of the context: *L'ultime défi de Sherlock Holmes* was published by Casterman and Payot/Rivages, in the collection Noir, a collection dedicated to the adaptation of major contemporary crime fictions like James Ellroy's *The Black Dahlia*, adapted by Miles Hyman, Matz and David Fincher, or Dennis Lehane's *Shutter Island*, adapted by Christian de Metter. Interestingly enough, while Dibdin himself scarcely made any reference to the holmesian universe as a whole (except, of course *The Final Problem* and *The Empty House*, two adventures to which he gave a darker twist) and instead chose to rely more heavily on historical elements and details (like the fact that, of the two inspectors in charge of the case, one is Lestrade and the other is Frederick George Abberline, the man who was really in charge of the Ripper investigation), Stromboni and Cotte chose to link their adaptation to the holmesian universe, not directly to the canon but rather to the adaptive tradition: they modeled their Holmes after Jeremy Brett (to whom the book is dedicated), the face of Holmes in the 1984-1994 *Sherlock Holmes* series. Jeremy Brett was known for bringing to light a previously unseen side of Holmes: he was the first to play the character with an eccentricity that bordered on mania or autism, probably inspired by the actor's own struggle with bipolar disorder. In an interview, Brett said "Holmes was threatening me. He became the dark side of the moon [for me], because he is moody and solitary."⁵⁵ Even though Brett remains, for many, the definitive Sherlock Holmes (he is regularly cited as one of the best Sherlock Holmes of all time in polls), the fact that Cotte and Stromboni used his image means that they share his interpretation of the character, and that they liken it to Dibdin's own twist on the detective.

⁵⁵ This excerpt from Brett's interview is quoted on page 30 of Anthony Slide's *Some Joe You Don't Know: An American Biographical Guide to the 100 British Television Personalities*.

There is, however, another very important inspiration for Cotte's and Stromboni's work, this time outside the canon: sensational literature, of which Holmes is supposed to be an expert (*A Study in Scarlet*, p.13). The first five pages of the graphic novel (cf. Appendix I) present us with a crime story, told by Holmes to Watson; this is a case Holmes has already solved (and that is present in Dibdin's original novel, but not at the same position: it comes only towards the beginning of the second half of the book): an apparently impossible murder that took place in Ceylon. There are several features of interest in these pages, the first being the design of the title on the top of the first page, reminiscent of the covers of 19th-century publications, with its colors, engravings and flamboyant use of typography. Then, of course, we have the page itself: the paper sheet is blotted and yellowish, to imitate the poor quality paper that was used in sensational publications at the time. The use of the colors follows a similar logic: again, it is very old-fashioned and seems cheap (each hue is obtained by having the surface dotted with different colors, rather than having full areas; this technique was used because it allowed the printed to save colored ink, which was was expensive, by leaving blank the space in-between dots). The layout of the pages is interesting as well, with uneven panels of various shapes, carefully designed to give some relief to the action: on the first page, we have a classic example of zooming effect: a general view of the house in the first panel, then the sitting room, then the face of the character to whom something is happening; after a de-zooming back to the sitting-room, in order to allow the murderer to enter the panel, another very close focus on his hand firing the revolver. We can notice that even more weight is given to the last image by making the shape of the panel round, which stands out on a page where the rest of the panels are squares. On the second page, we can notice that Watson's and Holmes's first direct interventions, that interrupt the flow of the narrative, quite literally invade the space of the page as well, using the same technique of round panels; though the effect is similar, the aim is quite different, as it is not a way to focus on one element important to the action but to introduce the second layer of narration (Holmes and Watson in the living-room). Similarly, the second page introduces a narrator that comments on every single image, replacing the dialogue in the story within the story with his own words (in that case, obviously, this narrator is Holmes). This omniscient narrator that can explain everything was a major feature of the first pieces of sensational fiction and pulp magazines, a tradition that remains alive in photonovels today, because the images alone could not deliver the whole message. Incidentally, the question of the relationship between text and image, and the prominence given to one or the other, is central in the debate between graphic novels, *bandes dessinées* and comic books. The way of drawing the action is itself reminiscent of that

tradition: the characters are always caught in the middle of an action or striking poses, which gives an illusion of fixity, counter-balanced by the dynamic use of the panels (the top half of the third page is a good example of that, with two medallions representing the two characters on the right, and the same two characters, this time caught in action, on the left). The evolution in Jules Stromboni's drawing, though it may not be perceptible for any reader unfamiliar with the artist, must nonetheless be noted: the influence of Sidney Paget's illustrations is blatant here, when one looks at the character's faces (except Holmes's, for obvious reasons: Sidney Paget never met Jeremy Brett) or at the overall use of shadows. This clearly demonstrates a will to follow in the footsteps of canonical holmesian illustration.⁵⁶ Interestingly enough, a similar set of remarks would apply to the original cover illustration for Caleb Carr's *The Italian Secretary* (cf Appendix II): again, the use of colors, the typography, the way the panels are put together – everything is reminiscent of 19th-century sensational fiction and the original publications of the canon. In this respect, the cover illustration for the original edition of *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story* is perhaps slightly disappointing, as it reminds one more of the way crime novels were illustrated in the 1970s than of the long tradition of canonical Holmesian adventures, and is therefore quite mundane whereas the novel itself is deeply shocking.

It could seem that the three novels under study do not have much in common, save the fact that they are all holmesian adaptation in the widest meaning of the term. We will nonetheless try to compare them to one another, using three key aspects or moments of a holmesian adaptation: the double enunciation, the defamiliarization of characters, and the first detection scene.

C) Holmesian adaptations: a compared analysis of the three novels

1] The art of forgery:

We have already said that the tradition of having Watson write an introduction to an older case originated from Conan Doyle's own writings; we may recall, for example, *The Final Problem*, *The Empty House* or even the very first short story, *A Scandal in Bohemia*.⁵⁷ These opening addresses to the reader had two main goals, unvarying but not always explicit: first, to create suspense from scratch; then, to bring about the topic of the adventure that will follow. These two features go quite obviously hand in hand, but their separation into two

⁵⁶ The influence of Arthur Twiddle or Howard Elcock (two illustrators that were employed by *The Strand* after Paget's death) over Stromboni is not to be forgotten either. Their illustrations were less iconic but more detailed than Paget's, with a plethora of indoor scenes or groups of active characters.

⁵⁷ Interestingly enough, Conan Doyle used it only in his short stories, and not his novels: those always begin *in medias res*.

distinct categories is quite easy, as Watson's main strategy to create suspense does not vary much: he mostly resorts to stock phrases and superlatives in order to mark this precise account as a case of particular interest, often comparing it to other untold cases summarized in one sentence or group of words. A template for all the following introductions can be found as early as the fifth short story of the canon, *The Five Orange Pips*:

“When I glance over my notes and records of the Sherlock Holmes cases between the years '82 and '90, I am faced by so many which present strange and interesting features, that it is no easy matter to know which to choose and which to leave. Some, however, have already gained publicity through the papers, and other have not offered a field for those peculiar qualities which my friend possessed in so high a degree, and which it is the object of these papers to illustrate. Some, too, have baffled his analytical skill, and would be, as narratives, beginnings without an ending, while others have been but partially cleared up, and have their explanations founded rather upon conjecture and surmise than on that absolute logical proof which was so dear to him. There is, however, one of these last which was so remarkable in its details and startling in its results, that I am tempted to give some account of it, in spite of the fact that there are points in connection with it which never have been, and probably never will be, entirely cleared up.” 85

The first and second underline passage are used to place the case in the general chronology of the canon, as well as to assert its topical relevance: the reader is told by Watson that, out of all the cases, some are more interesting than others. The reasoning is followed to its logical conclusion in the third underlined passage: out of these few cases, there is one that is even more fit to become a narrative than the others. The fourth underlined passage (and last line of the introduction before the beginning of the actual account) both explains why this case in particular is interesting and teases the reader with a glimpse of what to expect: a case so “remarkable” and “startling” that even Holmes was left partially baffled by its conclusion.

This template (with one or two variations introduced later) is to be found in exactly half of the cases that compose the canon. Its status as a topos of Conan Doyle's writing thus confirmed, it became available, as we have said, to all the “post-Doylian” writers for their own introductions.⁵⁸ If we now turn to the three adaptations under study, we can notice that the general arrangement of the introduction is respected in all three novels, with some important variations nonetheless. Indeed, Watson's introduction in the adaptations has another -albeit implicit- aim: to provoke in the reader the “willing suspension of disbelief” that is necessary to accept that, even though someone else than Conan Doyle is the writer, the case is

⁵⁸ As we have already said, the phrase “post-Doylian” was used by literary critic Michael Berlins for his review of *The Italian Secretary* in *The Times*. It is, as Watson would put it, not without features of interest, mostly because its meaning is unclear; we shall come back to it in our conclusion, when we analyse into more details the relevance of the prefixes “neo-” and “post-” in relation to our three holmesian adaptations.

a valid example of holmesian investigation, narrated by the same old Dr. Watson. In the terms employed by Gérard Genette in *Palimpsests*, this is the exact description of a forgery: “The purest, simplest, most neutral mimetic operation is that of the forgery” (« L'état mimétique le plus simple, ou le plus pur, ou le plus neutre, est sans doute celui de la forgerie. », 114), because its aim is to be as close as possible to the original text, “without any detail that would, in one way or another, draw the reader's attention to the mimetic natures of both the operation and the text.” (« sans rien qui attire, d'une manière ou d'une autre, l'attention sur l'opération mimétique elle-même ou sur le texte mimétique », *ibid.*). On the other hand, a difficulty is set for the post-Doylians, and it is usually tackled in the introduction (as we are about to see): how can the author explain the widening temporal gap between the times of narration/enunciation and that of publication? With Conan Doyle, that delay was supposed to be four or five years, enough time for Dr Watson to gather materials, ask for Holmes's permission, write a proper account from his notes, and publish it; now, the few dates given in the canon are more than a century away. We could say, therefore, that the two main challenges our post-Doylians will have to face is to make the reader believe, despite all appearances, that they are reading a canonical Holmes adventure, and to account for the temporal gap in a convincing way.⁵⁹

a) Horowitz: reinvesting the canon through Watson's own eyes

Horowitz's strategy is probably the most straight-forward and the less interesting (narratively speaking) of the three: to remind the reader that it is the good doctor who is speaking, he has an old Watson go over his whole life just before and after his meeting with Sherlock Holmes. In doing so, he reinvests elements that were already present in the canon, adding little details here and there, in an interesting re-imagining of the first chapters of *A Study in Scarlet*. The main difference between *The House of Silk* and its infamous precursor is the perspective of Watson: whereas *A Study in Scarlet* was supposedly written just after the case by a young doctor who did not really know how to write, *The House of Silk* is the very last account written by Watson “to complete the Holmes canon” (Horowitz, 5). It is very interesting to compare both: in *A Study in Scarlet*, Watson dwells for quite some time on his life before Holmes, and only meets his future room-mate at the bottom of page 6; in *The House of Silk*, Holmes's presence is always at the back of Watson's mind, and can be felt as

⁵⁹ Here, we must remember that neither of the three books under study is an updating in the accepted meaning of the term (Julie Sanders). The updating has been a way to dodge the question of the temporal gap, either by simply setting Holmes's and Watson's adventures at a new time without explanation (the Rathbone & Bruce film series, *Sherlock, Elementary...*), or by having Holmes and/or Watson escape from death and ageing through various pseudo-scientific methods (usually cryopreservation, as in *1994 Baker Street: Sherlock Holmes Returns* or *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*).

early as the first sentence (“I have often reflected upon the strange series of circumstances that led me to my long association with one of the most singular and remarkable figures of my age” Horowitz, 1). What Horowitz manages to do, however, is to re-capture Conan Doyle's idiosyncrasies and the evolution in Watson's narration throughout the canon: the Watson that writes, in *The House of Silk*, is the one who is able to hold a debate against Holmes in literary matters, the master of his own narrative discourse that has established his writing routines and tropes. Horowitz's introduction, when compared to the canonical examples we have discussed, is a patchwork of every detail, in which the meta-literary dimension is central.⁶⁰ Right after going over his meeting with Holmes, Watson writes:

“[Meeting Holmes] was the great turning point of my life. I had never had literary ambitions. Indeed, if anyone had suggested that I might be a published writer, I would have laughed at the thought. But I think I can say, in all honesty and without flattering myself, that I have become quite renowned for the way I have chronicled the adventures of the great man, and felt no small sense of honour when I was invited to speak at his memorial service at Westminster Abbey, an invitation which I respectfully declined. Holmes had often sneered at my prose style, and I could not help but feel that had I taken my place at the pulpit I would have felt him standing at my shoulder, gently mocking whatever I might say from beyond the grave.” 2-3

As it is made clear from the first two sentences of that paragraph, the Holmes Watson knew has become, in his head, inseparable from his literary counterpart, and throughout the chapter Watson repeatedly states that the Holmes tales were the most important thing in his life (even more than his family). What is also interesting is that it is made clear that Holmes is dead when Watson writes these lines, and that has a bearing on the account. We could say, in a sense, that it is precisely Holmes' death that draws Watson to his writing table for one last account; it is more or less what the doctor himself has to say about *The House of Silk*, as he writes it in the final pages of his introduction:

“I think of Holmes, often, waiting for me on the other side of that great shadow which must come to us all, and in truth I long to join him. I am alone. My old wounds plague me to the end and as a terrible and senseless war rages on the continent, I find I no longer understand the world in which I live. So why do I take up my pen again one final time to stir up memories which might better be forgotten? Perhaps my reasons are selfish. It could be that, like so many old men with their lives behind them, I am seeking some sort of solace. The nurses who attend upon me assure me that writing is therapeutic and will prevent me from falling into the moods to which I am sometimes inclined.” 4

⁶⁰ In an amusing meta-literary pun, Horowitz has invented a cousin of Watson, who set in motion the events that would lead to his meeting with Holmes by recommending him for the job of “Assistant Surgeon to the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers” (p.1), and named him “Arthur”.

Horowitz's greatest achievement in the perspective of a forgery is to capture the essence of the relationship between Holmes and Watson as it was depicted by Conan Doyle himself: their enduring friendship, but also the fact that it was Watson alone who decided to chronicle Holmes's exploits in spite of the detective's aversion to publicity and recurring criticism of the doctor's narrative choices. Watson, here, is clearly presented as writing for himself, for "selfish reasons", but that was already the case in some narratives towards the end of the canon (for example, *The Second Stain* starts with Watson admitting that he wished to write more narratives, but Holmes asked him not to do it, then finally yielded to Watson's demands; the beginning of *The Devil's Foot* is quite similar).

b) Dibdin and Carr: when forgery meets meta-fiction

It is interesting to note that, while their two narratives have very little in common, Michael Dibdin and Caleb Carr have both devised a similar strategy to make their adaptations appear authentic, a strategy that relies heavily on metafiction. Indeed, both authors chose to have their novel introduced by what is presented as an address to the reader by the editors, be it a proper foreword (in Dibdin, pp. 9-11) or a single sentence (in Carr). Let us examine their contents into more details.

In Carr, the address is very simple, and consequently does not seem to be of a major importance for the rest of the novel; in fact, narratively speaking, it is not. It is, apparently, simply a matter of spelling and reading ease:

“In the interest of accommodating modern readers, the anachronistic spellings of several words used by Dr John H. Watson have been updated.”

There are two details, however, that immediately catch our attention: the notion of anachronism and updating (passages 1, 2 and 4) and the mention of “Dr John H. Watson” as the author of the manuscript. Both participate in one effect: to recreate the relationship between Watson and the reader as it was established by Conan Doyle himself when he was writing the canon. In order to do so, the author must disappear completely, or at least try; the author of the account must be identified, by the reader, as Dr. Watson, and not Caleb Carr, Michael Dibdin or Anthony Horowitz (a striking case of willing suspension of disbelief, of course), but not Arthur Conan Doyle either: Carr's aim, here, is to re-establish Watson as the author, in exactly the same way Conan Doyle did himself. In order to do that, the real writer must become a ghost and blend in, and this is precisely the aim of that preliminary address: it

implicitly states that what has been published as *The Italian Secretary* is a manuscript written by Watson in his own style during his partnership with Sherlock Holmes, and that it has been read and reworked by someone (Caleb Carr, perhaps, but maybe just an unknown editor since the sentence is not signed; this is yet another way of showing the ideal absence of any real author) “in the interest of accommodating modern readers”. In other words, it is as if this anonymous corrector was explaining that had the manuscript been published in the Victorian era, it would not have been altered; because the language has evolved, the spelling must now be tampered with, but it is still a case written by Dr. Watson. The choice of the word “updated” at the end of the sentence is interesting in a holmesian context, especially when one already knows the story of *The Italian Secretary* for, in this narrative that is concerned mostly about the past, 21st-century spelling is probably the only clear updating the reader can find.

In fact, we could say that that preliminary address, precisely by emphasizing the temporal and cultural distance between the Victorian era and the early 2000s, creates what Roland Barthes dubbed an “effect of reality”: because that anonymous editor pretends that it was necessary to update the spelling of the manuscript, the reader is thrown back to their own memories of reading Victorian classics as they were written, probably struggling with some words that were not part of their everyday vocabulary. Consequently, even if that very sentence negates the possibility of such an effect on the reader, it does however bring that very experience to mind and contribute in marking *The Italian Secretary* as a canonical holmesian adventure written in the Victorian era, but published only nowadays, with all the necessary adjustments.⁶¹

In Michael Dibdin's *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story*, the forgery goes even further, the reader is met with a three-pages foreword by “the editors” at the start of the narrative, before Dr. Watson's introduction. In it is recounted the story of how Watson's manuscript was brought to the attention of the editors in 1976, fifty years after Watson's death, of the controversy it caused, and of the decision to ultimately publish the narrative, in spite (or perhaps because) of the outrage it caused among the editors. There are, again, a couple of remarks we can make concerning this foreword. Its first noticeable feature is no doubt that, once again, no names are given, except that of Dr Watson: the speakers are only referred to as “we” and “us”, and only identified as the book's editors by the mention of their status at the end of the foreword (p.11); their adversaries are “a powerful and energetic lobby formed of parties united only in their determination that the papers should never be published” (or

⁶¹ The Holmes adventures having become even more popular now than before, and being at the core popular literature, it was necessary not to set them apart from a popular public; this is probably how Caleb Carr (or the anonymous editor) would explain the need to update the spelling.

“they” and “them”). In a similar way as Carr, Dibdin is very careful to erase every possible trace of his identity as an author and literary creator, to mark that narrative as a creation of Dr. Watson, and he alone. But there is more than that. “The editors” mention that the manuscript was open and read aloud “in the presence of Watson's great-nephew” (10). Of course, as readers, we know that Watson was a fictional character, and consequently that the whole foreword is an elaborate fake; yet, the mention of Watson's death and its circumstances, of a remaining family member -however remote he may be- and even, later on, of Watson's senility towards the end of his life⁶², all this contributes in an effect of reality, reinforced again by the description of all the judiciary procedures that had to be undertaken to finally get the story out.

Where Carr left the reader in the dark as to the extent of the modifications that his anonymous editor had made to Watson's original narrative, the last paragraph in *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story's* foreword is very explicit in this respect:

“The preparation of the typescript for the press has not been onerous. Editorial intervention has been restricted to the silent correction of a few solecisms, the division of the original into chapters, and the provision of some indispensable footnotes. Apart from these gentle ministrations the work has been left to speak for itself –as, despite the author's protests, it so very effectively does.” 11

Here again, we are faced with what we could call an aesthetics of disappearance: “the editors” take good care in showing the reader how little they have modified with the original narrative; the choice of the word “restricted” needs to be taken into account. This is evidently a strategy to reinforce the strength of the narrative that corresponds to a particular conception of literature in which the author is always right because he is the creator of the text, whereas the editors can only belittle it by tampering with the manuscript. As we come to understand in the course of the introduction, the aim of these editors is to deliver to a greater audience the exact same shock they experienced at the first reading of the manuscript. In order to do that, they must leave it almost exactly as it was: raw, crude, and consequently ringing true; in other words, “[speaking] for itself”.

Contrary to Horowitz, Carr and Dibdin have used all the post-modern and meta-literary tools at their disposal for the purpose of what Genette called a “forgery”. This does not mean, however, that Horowitz's Watson is less convincing than the other two, because when one reads *The House of Silk*, one realises the extent of Horowitz's efforts to mimic Conan Doyle's

⁶² The main argument of those who did not want to see the narrative published was, according to “the editors”, the fact that Watson was “practically a delusional psychotic from 1919 onwards” and, therefore, that the whole manuscript was nothing but “pathetic ravings” (10).

writing style. Now that this dimension has been analysed, we need to focus on the way the three authors have tackled the problem of the temporal gap.

2] Accounting for the hundred-years' gap:

We have now proven that the aim of all three authors, through their forewords, is to erase all their traces, so as to present the case as a genuine continuation of the canon, supposedly written by Dr. Watson -in other words, to copy the strategy Conan Doyle had already put to the test, sometimes with the help of meta-literary devices. The main problem, now, is that if the authors do not succeed in accounting for the century (or half-century in Dibdin) between what is presented as the time of the writing of the case and the time of its publication, the whole strategy falls apart: one cannot, on the one hand, pretend that the original John Watson is writing, and on the other hand assert that he is writing nowadays. Consequently, all three authors had to come up with explanations for this “Greater Hiatus”;⁶³ as we are about to see, they all have at least one common feature: a tinge of scandal.

a) Caleb Carr: Don't ask, don't tell or Let the reader guess

On this precise point, the less interesting strategy is perhaps the one developed by Caleb Carr in the editors' note and the first chapter of *The Italian Secretary*, because it does not really solve the problem, at least explicitly. We can recall that the preliminary note implied that the manuscript had indeed been written by Watson, more or less at the time when he was writing the rest. The first chapter hardly provides more clues as to why the case was not published before, but perhaps we may begin to form an answer if we read between the lines.

Watson's first chapter, entitled “On Deposit at Cox's Bank”, performs all the duties of a typical doylan introduction (like those we have examined before). It starts by categorizing firmly the following case so as to give the reader an idea of what they are about to read: it is replaced in the context of “the published compendium of the many adventures which [Watson] undertook in the company of Mr Sherlock Holmes” (1), but the focus is immediately narrowed down to cases of political importance, in which the detective and his friend had to deal directly or indirectly with the Crown. This is probably the key detail here, because it serves as Carr's excuse for the delayed publishing of this case:

“it must surely become more apparent why the greater portion of my accounts of such cases has come to rest – perhaps never to be removed or revealed – in the tin dispatch-box that I long ago entrusted to the vaults of

⁶³ The “Great Hiatus” is a phrase used by holmesian scholars to refer to the period of time (three years) during which Holmes is presumed dead, between *The Final Problem* and *The Empty House*. Considering that Conan Doyle had not intended for Holmes to come back from the dead, and that the tone of the stories evolved afterwards, we thought that this pun was particularly relevant in the context of holmesian adaptations.

Carr is using the topos of "the Watson papers" (Dibdin 10) in pretty much the same way Conan Doyle himself did here, in cases like *The Illustrious Client*, *The Noble Bachelor* or *The Speckled Band*: Watson's bank vault holds an apparently unlimited number of cases of two different types, those which were not interesting enough to make good accounts, and those which were deemed too sensitive to be published immediately after the case. The reason behind the delayed publishing of *The Italian Secretary* is apparently its concern with matters of state importance, a reason especially Watson, as a former soldier and convinced Victorian, would respect. We have already discussed this strategy as in fact part of the teasing of the story, as in Conan Doyle. What is interesting here is that Watson nuances almost immediately this first assertion (that the case is a political one and has been set aside solely because of its possibly classified content) and brings a second dimension to the narrative which also serves as an excuse for delaying the publication in the last two paragraphs of the first chapter:

"Indeed, [the details of the case] might have seemed, even to me, no more than fevered imaginings, a series of dreams inadequately separated from the waking world, had not Sherlock Holmes been ready with explanations for nearly all of the many twists and developments of the case. *Nearly* all...
And because of those few unresolved questions, the matter of the Italian Secretary has always been, for me, a source of recurring doubts, rather than (as has more generally been the case regarding my experiences with Holmes) reassuring conclusions. These doubts, to be sure, have remained largely unspoken, despite their power. For there are recesses of the mind to which no man allows even his closest fellows access; not, that is, unless he wishes to hazard an involuntary sojourn in Bedlam..." 2/3

The end of the introduction seems, at first, only devised to tease the reader: the tale of mystery they are about to read has (partially) baffled even the master of reasoning himself. But if we pay close attention to Watson's feelings -as he, after all, is the ultimate master of narration, and the judge of which story is worthy of publication- we may find another reason for the delay in the publication of the case. As Watson puts it quite plainly, the aim of any of his narratives is to reassure the reader by showing him a picture of the world that is initially chaotic and problematic, and eventually ordered and rationally explained; this, in *The Italian Secretary*, is not the case, because the central question of whether or not there was the ghost of David Rizzio in the West Tower is not fully answered. This, for Watson's mind, is an essential problem: if he himself cannot be sure of all the outcomes of his narrative, then he is not fully master of it, and the case can be deemed a failure, in a purely rational and scientific perspective. One needs to remember that even in the few cases of the canon in which Holmes

fails to carry out his mission of protection of the clients (we may remember *The Dancing Men* or *The Five Orange Pips*, the two most striking examples perhaps), the mystery is explained; in this first chapter, on the other hand, Watson teases the reader precisely the reverse: a mission that is accomplished, but a mystery that is not solved. The case, one understands, is not closed; this is something Watson cannot bear.

One could argue that Carr has still not given any explanation as to the delay in the release of the case, but this is where the author is extremely intelligent: nothing, in this first chapter, indicates that Watson attempted to publish the account of the case. If we come back to the first passage we have analysed, Watson only states that the manuscript of *The Italian Secretary* is among the accounts that have been “entrusted to the vaults of Cox's Bank” (2) because of its political nature; if anything, the addition of the following paragraphs only imply that Watson himself was not in favour of publishing the case. We can only make conjectures as to why Carr did not see fit to give a full explanation of how the manuscript was ultimately found and published in 2004 (where many other post-Doylians have done so), but it gives the case a different aura from the two others under study if we follow that hypothesis, because it both places the case inside the canon while separating it from all the other stories.

b) Anthony Horowitz and the House of Scandal:

Watson's foreword to *The House of Silk* is pretty much the contrary of the one we have just analysed, as nothing is left ambiguous and implicit. Interestingly enough, when Watson's position as master of his own narrative was threatened in Carr, it is firmly set in Horowitz, even more so with Holmes's death a year prior to Watson's account. Consequently, Watson's foreword in Horowitz reads very much like any of Watson's introductions in the canon, carefully giving away details of the case he is about to write, and raising the reader's expectations at the same time. Let us take as an example the end of the foreword:

“The adventures of *The Man in the Flat Cap* and *The House of Silk* were, in some respects, the most sensational of Sherlock Holmes's career but at the time it was impossible for me to tell them, for reasons that will become abundantly clear. [...] And yet it has always been my desire to set them down, to complete the Holmes canon. In this I am like a chemist in pursuit of a formula, or perhaps a collector of rare stamps who cannot take full pride in his catalogue knowing there to be two or three specimen that have evaded his grasp. I cannot prevent myself. It must be done.

It was impossible before – and I am not just referring to Holmes's well-known aversion for publicity. No, the events I am about to described were simply too monstrous, too shocking to appear in print. They still are. It is no exaggeration to suggest that they would tear apart the entire fabric of society and, particularly at a time of war, this is something I cannot risk. When I am done, assuming I have the strength for the task, I will have this manuscript packed up and sent to the vaults of Cox and Co. in Charing Cross, where

certain others of my private papers are stored. I will give instructions that for one hundred years, the packet must not be opened." 4/5

These two paragraphs introduce three different, but intertwined, ideas: Watson's old-established desire to set down the two cases because he felt that without them the canon could not be complete (that Watson would use the word "canon" is probably slightly inaccurate, since for him the Holmes adventures are not fiction but fact);⁶⁴ the impossibility to do so, both because of Holmes's longing for a quiet retirement and because Watson fears that the case would have unfortunate consequences on the society he, as a soldier, a patriot and Holmes's biographer, has done everything to protect; the ultimate strategy devised by Watson for the publication of the case, defusing the situation by postponing it. Implicitly, there is also the idea that Watson is writing this account as some sort of his testament, as he stresses several times in the novel that the only reason he is still in the world of the living is because he has not completed his task as a biographer; the end of the novel leaves Watson's fate unclear, but it is possible that he dies shortly after he has written the conclusion. This dimension must not be overlooked, as it will inform the whole novel and, perhaps, allow the writer to make adjustments to the original canon, since Watson's last account may well turn into a confession on his deathbed.

This dimension is, perhaps, the only true addition that Horowitz has made to the traditional holmesian introduction: even the excuse of a scandal that delayed the publication of a case was, as we have already seen, used rather a lot by Conan Doyle. However, an adventure of Sherlock Holmes narrated by a Watson that has entered the twilight of his days and who may, as a consequence, have a different perspective not only on his collaboration with Holmes but also on the other characters that took part in their adventures (Lestrade, Mycroft, Moriarty) and on his own position as a writer/ biographer is entirely new. As we will see later on, if the scandalous nature of the case is presented as Watson's excuse for delaying its publication by a hundred years, Watson's old age and wisdom is Horowitz's excuse for the small but numerous alterations he has made to the canon (never going so far as to contradict it, obviously; he was still under the guidance of Conan Doyle Estate, Ltd. after all). The reader that is familiar with the canon will nonetheless note that, even if Conan Doyle had used the excuse of the scandal before, Horowitz is raising the stakes here: the events linked to "The House of Silk" (and, on a much smaller scale, to "The Man in the Flat Cap") are so

⁶⁴ That, in itself, raises the reader's expectations: if Watson himself thinks that these two cases are major works of deduction, at a time when he has already written the rest of the canon, it means that they are no small-time investigations of a missing racehorse.

momentous that years after their resolution they would still prove destructive to the whole nation; in the canon, the scandals Watson tried to avoid usually concerned private individuals and their reputations, and the safety of the British Empire was never in the balance (at least, not that explicitly).

c) Michael Dibdin: Watson in “an age of darkness”

In *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story*, Dibdin adopts a similar strategy -or rather, we may say that Horowitz was probably influenced by Dibdin's ideas when he wrote *The House of Silk*. However, Dibdin goes further than Horowitz by having Watson word a concern that, in Horowitz, is only implicit: the question of the reading public. Indeed, if both Watsons decide to delay the publication of the account by a hundred years or so, in order to defuse the threat that it represents to their society, both are not equally concerned about the reception of the piece. Horowitz's Watson merely states:

“It is impossible to imagine what the world will be like then, what advances mankind will have made, but perhaps future readers will be more inured to scandal and corruption than my own would have been. To them I bequeath one last portrait of Mr Sherlock Holmes, and a perspective that has not been seen before.” 5

The Watson that is speaking here does not seem really concerned about how his future readers will react to his account; since he cannot imagine “what the world will be like then”, he simply decides not to give it any thought and let future readers do whatever they wish with his narrative. In fact, it is repeatedly made explicit throughout the novel that the Watson of *The House of Silk* is mostly writing for himself, as a way to re-live a glorious past because the present is too grim; however, oddly enough, he never seems to doubt that Holmes's fame will survive him and that, a hundred years afterwards, his narrative will still make sense: if he gives the readers “one last portrait” and “a perspective that has not been seen before”, it means that they must already be familiar with other portraits and other perspectives on Holmes and Watson. In this respect, Horowitz is really writing as a post-Doylian, in the sense that it does not occur to him to question the influence Conan Doyle has had on modern culture.

It could be argued that we are being unfair with Horowitz and his Watson by addressing them this sort of criticism: a post-Doylian writing in the 2010s knows that people still remember Holmes's and Watson's names a hundred years after their débuts, and may forget to have Watson word this sort of concern. It would be an unfair criticism had Michael Dibdin not put that issue at the heart of his Watson's first address to the reader, that we now turn to: the

narrative starts with a foreword explaining how “the Watson papers” (Dibdin, 10) re-surfaced in 1976 only, because their contents are “extremely controversial” and “deeply [shocking]” (11) and could not, therefore, have been published at the time.⁶⁵ More interesting to us now is the beginning of Watson's introduction, just after that; the third paragraph runs like this:

“But at once I run up against a problem which A.C.D. never dreamed of – I cannot know who is reading this. These words will not see print before 1972, at the earliest. What manner of men will walk the earth at that fabulous date? Will any of this matter to you? Perhaps no one will ever have heard of Jack the Ripper, or of Sherlock Holmes either. How can I know? Nevertheless, I must go on, and if I say too much or too little for your understanding, you will no doubt pardon an old man living out his days in a barbarous age – an age of darkness. For my part, I will try not to take too much for granted.” 14

What Dibdin does here is to cleverly remind the reader of the conditions of writing and publication in the Victorian era, that Conan Doyle himself had to face: a new author had to know who his readership would be, how they would react, what their interests were, etc. In order to do that, Conan Doyle could count on a common culture: those who read *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* were mostly average middle-class Victorians yearning for entertainment and thrills, familiar with sensational fiction and newspaper accounts alike, and sharing the same political and social ideals (prosperity, order, imperialism...). In truth, Conan Doyle's reading public had many things in common with his narrator, Dr. John Watson. Now, what Dibdin does in his introduction is to push Watson to his limits as a writer, at the same time as he faces his greatest challenge: writing for an audience he cannot begin to imagine. Dibdin's main idea, here, is to imagine the meeting between Watson and Conan Doyle, then to turn the latter into the former's literary agent and ghost: Watson writes notes about the cases, Conan Doyle turns them into proper narratives. Thus, Watson is robbed, right from the start, of his literary credibility, and he is fully aware of it: the first paragraph of the introduction is precisely him attempting to imitate Conan Doyle's style, only to realise and admit his failure in the second. This questioning of the author's credibility and narrative power is deeply linked, here, to the absence of an identifiable and knowable readership: as he writes it himself, Watson is literally in “an age of darkness” both for himself and for the future reader, who cannot hope to understand it without help. On the other hand, as Watson himself writes just a few lines above this paragraph, even if he does manage to make the narrative understandable, his reliability will be put into question, precisely because of its shocking nature:

“Ah, what a thing [A.C.D.] would make of [my story]! Gripping the reader with his opening words and sweeping him off on a brisk guided tour of the plot; getting the dates wrong, falling over the facts, confusing the names, all

⁶⁵ We will come back to that foreword in just a moment, comparing it with Carr's.

with such sheer panache that no one would dream of asking awkward questions, or doubt for one moment that what they were hearing was the whole truth and nothing but. Whereas I will probably be dismissed as a senile dreamer and a bungling purveyor of ill-told tales. But then it is none of my business to try and convince anyone. I leave that to the men of letters. I am a doctor and a soldier; all I can do is make my report." 14

Here again, Dibdin shows an awareness of his reader's horizon of aspiration and implicitly puts the notion of scandal at the heart of his novel, by having Watson himself word the criticisms that can be addressed to him and relinquish at least partially his narrative powers (by refusing to consider himself a "[man] of letters"). Those criticisms echo the words written by "the editors" in the foreword, that we have already mentioned; it may be interesting to note that they target Watson's person rather than the narrative he develops, and always attempt to pass him off as delusional. This unreliability of the narrator/protagonist's perspective is an element that Dibdin repeatedly picks up throughout the narrative, with hallucinatory sequences -the most memorable being, of course, the ending of the novel at the Reichenbach Falls. At the same time, Watson does not fail to undermine Conan Doyle's credibility as a source of verified information as well (as we have said, in Dibdin, Conan Doyle is portrayed as Watson's literary half), addressing most of the canonical issues that the critics are debating. Paradoxically, in an attempt to bring out "the whole truth and nothing but" without any of Conan Doyle's literary embellishments, Watson throws the reader into a pit of confusion and doubt, as the narrative his introduction announces is sure to clash with almost everything the reader thinks he knows. The reader's reactions are shaped in advance by Watson's own perception of his tale, of his writing style, and also by the imaginary reactions to the first reading of the manuscript as detailed in the forged "Foreword by the Editors".

d) Cotte and Stromboni's framed narrative: a *mise en abyme* of the adventure

We must heed the fact that Olivier Cotte and Jules Stromboni chose to have their adaptation start in a very different way, without any preliminary address to the reader by Watson. Instead, the story starts with a different *mise en abyme*, with Holmes telling Watson about a case he has just solved in Ceylon. We have already analysed the way the second layer of narrative (Holmes and Watson in their sitting-room) gradually invades the first one (Holmes's story); we must bear in mind, though, that this case within a case is not an invention of Cotte and Stromboni, since it is already present within Dibdin's narrative, but at a very different moment in the story: the case is discussed at Holmes's and Watson's first meeting after the Great Hiatus (pp.142-145). Cotte and Stromboni have however added some quite significant details in the dialogue, mostly Watson's question at the end of Holmes's

account (cf Appendix I). Obviously, Holmes's justification for not having told the truth to the police, and his subsequent cue, are almost meant as an epigraph to the whole book:

“They are exceptional beings, Watson, and human justice cannot apply to them. I am sure that, had you been in my position, you would have made the same choice I have.”¹⁴

Holmes's reference to the irrelevance of justice and human law in some cases rings true when one thinks of the canon (after all, Holmes refused to disclose his results to the official force on several occasions because he believes that the judiciary system would not have treated the criminals fairly, or that there were alleviating circumstances that would not have been taken into account), but it is mostly meant as a prefiguration of Watson's own inner debate when he learns of Holmes's crimes. In Dibdin's novel, it echoes rather than announces Watson's conundrum, because Watson has already made up his mind when Holmes tells him about that case; moreover, the reason behind Holmes's kindness to the murderer is left unsaid.

Cotte and Stromboni chose to postpone most of Dibdin's post-modern games with fiction and reality to the last two pages of the graphic novel, in which the reader sees Watson and Conan Doyle seated together in the latter's living-room, having just finished recounting the story. The last words of the graphic novel echo, in a clever way, Holmes's words in the introduction: to Conan Doyle who asks him why he has never informed the police that Holmes was the Ripper, Watson answers “Because he was, after all, an exceptional being... and because he was my friend” (cf Appendix III). Consequently, by refusing to play with the fourth wall and by beginning *in medias res* with Holmes (rather than Watson) as the narrator, the graphic novel's introduction is quite different both from the canonical template established by Conan Doyle and from the introductions of the other adaptations under study. On the other hand, this type of scene where Holmes reminds Watson of his methods of investigation by illustrating his deductive process with a precise example may remind us of another *topos* in the original canon that has been re-invested by adaptations: what we could call the “scene of gratuitous detection.”

3] The scene of gratuitous detection: a warming-up for Holmes... and for the author

The template for what would become the scene of gratuitous detection was introduced, like many other *topoi* of the canon, in *The Sign of the Four*. It was, for Conan Doyle, a good way to remind readers of Holmes's powers early on in the novel –a necessary adjustment since many people had not read *A Study in Scarlet* when the second holmesian adventure was published. The scene, in which Holmes eventually “detects” a watch that Watson has just

presented him with, reads almost like a (very) short stand-alone story, since it has all the ingredients of a traditional case (an initial mystery, Holmes's observations and deductions explained to Watson, the latter's bafflement) and has no bearing on the plot of the novel as a whole. It also reminds the reader of the way the Holmes-Watson dynamics work, the way they react with each other, and of their different (and sometimes clashing) personalities.

The scene starts famously with Watson trying to get Holmes out of his drug-induced stupor and boredom. After discussing briefly the merits of Watson's published account of *A Study in Scarlet* (Holmes being, as he always will be in the rest of the canon, highly critical of his friend's "romanticism" p.110) and some of Holmes's unchronicled cases, the doctor asks Holmes for another explanation of his methods:

"But you spoke just now of observation and deduction. Surely one to some extent implies the other.'

'Why, hardly,' he answered [...]. 'For example, observation shows me that you have been to the Wigmore Street Post Office this morning, but deduction lets me know that when there you dispatched a telegram.'

'Right!' said I. 'Right on both points! But I confess that I don't see how you arrived at it.'

[...]

'Observation tells me that you have a little reddish mould adhering to your instep. Just opposite the Wigmore Street office they have taken up the pavement and thrown up some earth, which lies in such a way that it is difficult to avoid treading in it when entering. [...] The rest is deduction.'

'How, then, did you deduce the telegram?'

'Why, of course I knew that you did not write a letter, since I sat opposite to you all morning. I see also in your open desk there that you have a sheet of stamps and a thick bundle of postcards. What could you go into the post office for, than, but to send a wire? Eliminate all other factors, and the one which remains must be the truth." 112/113

Reading this scene almost reminds one of one of Plato's dialogues, with Holmes as Socrates explaining his method to his interlocutor in a very didactic way. Conan Doyle organises the dialogue following a binary outline that rests on the two key concepts of Holmes's method: observation and deduction (always in that order). The end of the scene even features the first formulation of one of Holmes's key ideas (picked up later in that same story with a different phrasing: "when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be the truth" p.140).

In a move that, again, reminds the reader of Plato, Watson decides to put Holmes's abilities "to a more severe test" (113) before validating them. Narratively speaking, this is completely preposterous and artificial, as Watson has already had the chance to witness Holmes's prowess during the events of *A Study in Scarlet*; this is another proof that Conan Doyle knew he needed to start it all over again with *The Sign of the Four*, because of the lack

of publicity *A Study in Scarlet* had received. Watson, then, presents Holmes with a watch “which has recently come into [his] possession” (*ibid.*), confident that Holmes will not be able to deduce anything from it. Of course, Holmes passes the test to Watson's bafflement; then, after another ranting concerning how depressing life is without any challenging puzzles for the intellect, Mrs Hudson announces a visitor. This visitor will turn out to be Mary Morstan, their client and Watson's future fiancée and wife; when the first chapter ends, however, she has not really entered the narrative yet (only her name is mentioned, neither Holmes nor Watson has seen her yet). This is interesting, because it shows that the first chapter is truly set apart from the rest of the novel both in the contents (since the scene does not have any explicit link with the plot, except for the purely chronological succession of events) and in the form (the abrupt end of the chapter quite explicitly shows that it was Conan Doyle's intention to open the novel with a sort of introductory sequence separated from the main narrative).

This “scene of gratuitous detection” is one of the canonical elements that has been used the most in holmesian adaptations. Its purpose is, however, slightly different from its canonical one: when Conan Doyle meant for it to remind the reader of the fictional universe he was creating, using the repetition of unchanging motifs or key ideas (Holmes and Watson in the living-room, Holmes's boredom, Watson's literary awareness, etc), the new author is, on the other hand, an alien in this universe; his purpose, then, will be to convince the reader that he too can be at home with Conan Doyle's creation. Contrary to the foreword, in which the author needs to show how adaptable to a new context Holmes and Watson can be, in this scene of gratuitous detection it is the author who needs to adapt to Conan Doyle's rules of writing -or to reject them completely. This first chapter represents, for the author of the adaptation, the first time he directly confronts the canon; its importance must therefore not be neglected.

a) Horowitz: a most traditional beginning

Here again, Horowitz's inspiration is clearly the early years of the holmesian canon, with several narrative echoes of *A Study in Scarlet* and *The Sign of the Four*, and an ominous reference to *The Adventure of the Dying Detective*. All these references are, however, to be taken within the narrative framework of a sustained adaptation of yet another case -albeit a minor one-, *The Adventure of the Cardboard Box*. We shall examine them one after the other.

The first scene of *The Adventure of the Cardboard Box* display what is probably the most striking example of a scene of gratuitous detection that we can find in the whole canon:

“Finding that Holmes was too absorbed for conversation I had tossed aside the barren paper and, leaning back in my chair, I fell into a brown study.

Suddenly my companion's voice broke in upon my thoughts.
'You are right, Watson,' said he. 'It does seem a most preposterous way of settling a dispute.'
'Most preposterous!' I exclaimed, and then suddenly realizing how he had echoed the inmost thought of my soul, I sat up in my chair and stared at him in blank amazement.
'What is this, Holmes?' I cried. 'This is beyond anything which I could have imagined.'
He laughed heartily at my perplexity.
'You remember,' said he, 'that some little time ago when I read you the passage in one of Poe's sketches in which a close reasoner follows the unspoken thoughts of his companion, you were inclined to treat the matter as a mere *tour-de-force* of the author. On my remarking that I was constantly in the habit of doing the same thing you expressed incredulity.'" 257/258

To speak in Genettian terms, this short story is already a hypertext in the way that it refers to two previous texts that Conan Doyle is taking as examples: the first is explicitly Edgar Allan Poe's three detective stories featuring Auguste Dupin, which Conan Doyle acknowledged as a predecessor for Holmes; the second is Conan Doyle's own novel *A Study in Scarlet*, in which Watson himself, at the beginning, compares Holmes to Dupin.⁶⁶ Naturally, Holmes goes on to explain how he deduced what Watson was thinking by analysing his attitude and his reactions, and Watson ultimately congratulates him; then, they are ready to take on the case of Miss Susan Cushing's "gruesome packet" (*ibid.* 259).

From the first lines of Horowitz's first chapter, the case of *The Cardboard Box* springs to mind. Indeed, the whole dialogue is organised in almost exactly the same way -except that what is a typical paragraph of introduction in *The Cardboard Box* is expanded to a preface in *The House of Silk*, as we have already seen. Horowitz's scene reads as follows:

"'Influenza is unpleasant,' Sherlock Holmes remarked, 'but you are right in thinking that, with your wife's help, the child will recover very soon.'
'I very much hope so,' I replied, then stopped and gazed at him in wide-eyed astonishment. My tea had been halfway to my lips but I returned it to the table with such force that the cup and the saucer almost parted company. 'But for Heaven's sake, Holmes!' I exclaimed. 'You have taken the very thoughts from my head. I swear I have not uttered a word about the child or his illness. You know that my wife is away – that much you might have deduced from my presence here. But I have not yet mentioned to you the reason for her absence and I am certain that there has been nothing in my behaviour that could have given you any clue.'
[...]
'You look at me as if I were a conjuror,' Holmes remarked, with a laugh. 'I

⁶⁶ It may be quite amusing to remember Holmes's very derogatory remarks concerning Dupin in *A Study in Scarlet*: "No doubt you think you are complementing me in comparing me to Dupin. [...] Now, in my opinion, Dupin was a very inferior fellow. That trick of his of breaking in on his friend's thoughts with an apropos remark after a quarter of an hour's silence is really very showy and superficial." (16). In *The Cardboard Box*, then, it would seem that the mind of the great detective has changed concerning this "trick", and that Watson's memory fails him...

take it you have given up on the works of Edgar Allen Poe?

'You mean his detective, Dupin?' I said.

'He used a method which he termed ratiocination. In his view, it was possible to read a person's innermost thoughts without their even needing to speak. It could all be done from a simple study of their movements, by the very flicker of an eyebrow. The idea impressed me greatly at the time but I seem to recall that you were somewhat scornful-'" 6/8

It is not even necessary to look at the passages we have underlined to sense the shadow of Conan Doyle's original scene behind Horowitz's adaptation. Let us try to focus, on the other hand, on the differences between Conan Doyle's source-text and Horowitz's rewriting. The most obvious shift is probably the fact that Holmes gives more details on Poe's hero and his method of deduction in Horowitz, thus intensifying the allusion to Poe's text but also to *A Study in Scarlet*. This is entirely logical because, as we know, *The House of Silk* represents Watson's very last account and a way to delve into his memories of his late friend; consequently, making parallels with the duo's very first meeting and investigation together is a good way for Horowitz to pay homage to Conan Doyle. One could also argue that having Holmes voice an entirely different opinion of his American predecessor from the one he had in *A Study in Scarlet* is already a mild re-appropriation of the character on Horowitz's part. However, we must not forget that Conan Doyle himself had Holmes's reaction when mentioning Dupin shift from scorn to quiet approbation between the two canonical narratives, even though he never went so far as to admit he was "impressed" by another detective's feats; therefore, we doubt that we really can speak of a re-appropriation of the character -at this stage in the novel, at least.

The reader is aware of Holmes's very dry answer to Watson when, in the last chapter of *The Sign of the Four*, the doctor announces that he is getting married with Mary Morstan, their client: "I really cannot congratulate you. [...] Love is an emotional thing, and whatever is emotional is opposed to that true, cold reason which I place above all things." (Conan Doyle, *The Sign of the Four*, 204). In the context of *The House of Silk*, where a married Watson returns for a couple of days to 221B Baker Street because his wife is away, the character of Mary was bound to be important, especially since the case is set only after two years of marriage. It is nonetheless very interesting that Holmes should be the one to bring her into the narrative (and from the very beginning of the dialogue), even more so since Watson reminds the reader of Holmes's disapproval of the marriage and begins the narrative that a scene so very reminiscent of their bachelor days:

"[Holmes] had greeted me warmly, and as I took my place opposite him, I felt the strange sensation that I was awakening from a dream. It was as if the

last two years had never happened, that I had never met my beloved Mary, married her and moved to our home in Kensington, purchased with the proceeds of the Agra pearls. I could still have been a bachelor, living here with Holmes, sharing with him the excitement of the chase and the unravelling of yet another mystery.

And it occurred to me that he might well have preferred it thus. Holmes spoke seldom about my domestic arrangements. He had been abroad at the time of my wedding and it had occurred to me then that it might not have been entirely a coincidence. It would be unfair to say that the entire subject of my marriage was forbidden, but there was an unspoken agreement that we would not discuss it at any length.” 7/8

Paradoxically, even as Holmes is mentioning Mary in his detection of Watson's thoughts, Watson himself is excluding the very possibility of her intervening in the narrative; in this respect again, the scene reminds us of *A Study in Scarlet* and *The Cardboard Box*, two adventures taking place before Watson's marriage. The reference to Mary, here, is more Horowitz trying to set firmly the temporal context of *The House of Silk* than anything else; she hardly be present in the narrative as a whole, and again as an instrument of Holmes's will (chapter 17, a disguised and outlawed Holmes uses her to give a coded message to Watson). It is also in the perspective of locating precisely the case within the original canon that Horowitz refers implicitly but quite extensively to a fourth case, *The Adventure of the Dying Detective*, not written by Conan Doyle before the 1910s but set in the 1890s. This case, one of the most shocking in the canon, has Holmes “deliberately [starve] himself for three days and three nights, taking neither food nor water, in order to persuade a particularly cruel and vengeful adversary that he was close to death” (*The House of Silk* 7), and it is the excuse given by Watson in *The House of Silk* to stay at Baker Street to watch over his friend while his wife is away. It is also possible that this allusion to Holmes's apparent physical decay in *The Dying Detective* be an ominous clue left by Horowitz as to the detective's ruse in chapter 15 of *The House of Silk* when, to avoid an assassination attempt, he pretends to be terminally ill and is thus able to escape from Holloway Prison.

We have not dwelt long on Horowitz's rewriting of the scene of gratuitous detection because, as the extracts from *The House of Silk* that we have reproduced show very well, he tries his best to blend in and bends himself to every rule set by Conan Doyle in his canonical template. With the two other novels under study, however, things will prove a trifle more complex than that, as we are about to see.

b) Carr: Watson as the great detective?

Caleb Carr's main inspiration for *The Italian Secretary* as a whole may be *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, yet his second chapter (the first is Watson's introduction, that we have

already analysed) is a rewriting of the opening sequence of another Holmes adventure: *The Valley of Fear*. In this, the last and least famous of the four canonical novels, Watson and Holmes are living together in Baker Street (it is set during “the early days at the end of the 'eighties” p.12), and the two friends are trying to decipher a message from one of the detective's informers in the criminal world, Porlock. Holmes turns this into an intellectual game in which, as always, he leads and Watson follows, in a very didactic way that, again, may call to mind Plato's dialogues:

“The cipher message begins with a large 534, does it not? We may take it as a working hypothesis that 534 is the particular page to which the cipher refers. So our book has already become a *large* book, which surely is something gained. What other indications do we have as to the nature of this large book? The next sign is C2. What do you make of that, Watson?’

‘Chapter the second, no doubt.’

‘Hardly that, Watson. You will, I am sure, agree with me that if the page be given, the number of the chapter is immaterial. Also that if page 534 only finds us in the second chapter, the length of the first one must have been really intolerable.’

‘Column!’ I cried.

‘Brilliant, Watson. You are scintillating this morning. If it is not column, then I am very much deceived. So now, you see, we begin to visualize a large book, printed in double columns, which are each of a considerable length, since one of the words is numbered in the document as the two hundred and ninety-third. Have we reached the limits of what reason can supply?’

‘I fear that we have.’

‘Surely you do yourself an injustice. One more coruscation, my dear Watson. Yet another brain-wave.” 8/9

This scene is unique in the canon, as it presents Holmes without any advantages on Watson and forcing himself to reason step by step along with his friend and waiting for Watson to make the rational links himself rather than giving his conclusions first and explaining then the method used to understand the whole problem. In spite of Holmes's constant irony and banter (see the underlined passages), it is almost as if the great detective needed Watson to echo his theories in order to validate them. We must nonetheless remember that *The Valley of Fear* differs slightly from the other three novels of the canon, and from the template we have established: the first detection scene is not exactly “gratuitous” since Holmes is trying to decipher a telegram from one of Moriarty's agents that he has intercepted. Even if the message is not mentioned afterwards and has no direct consequence on the investigation (rather, it leads the investigators in the wrong direction, since the man Moriarty wanted to have murdered and who apparently died is in fact not dead, because he killed the hired murderer and disguised the corpse as himself), it does have a bearing on Holmes' decision to investigate the Birlstone tragedy (because it is the proof that Moriarty is somehow

behind it).⁶⁷

In *The Italian Secretary*, the context is slightly different: when Watson comes in, Holmes has already deciphered the message. However here again the detective challenges Watson to crack the code as well over breakfast, and the doctor complies. The whole dialogue is once more very didactic, as we follow Watson focusing on one clue after the other in the telegram, while Holmes is encouraging him in a similar way (another comical effect is added by the fact that Holmes, having angered Mrs. Hudson, is trying to prepare breakfast on his own; he is therefore using a chemical beaker for tea and attempting to find a box of biscuits that he had stashed ages ago). We will not reproduce the whole scene, as it is quite longer than the original, and the conversation often breaches on other subjects than the one that we are concerned with here. Let us examine an extract instead:

“Really, Watson – surely, even after a day of absorbing medical minutiae, you can find the meaning in Mycroft's excessively colourful opening: “Youse done a special one, at No. 8 Pall Mall”? The slang of the New York Bowery, apparently combined with a London address – one located mere steps from Mycroft's very rooms? Doubtless, we are meant to— ’

'Yes!' I felt my own features brighten, despite the still-inescapable stench of the bitter tea, which, as Holmes had predicted, seemed at least to be waking my mind from a long day's mental labour. “Youse done,” I said again. 'Euston – Euston Station; many of the trains for Scotland leave from it!'

Holmes laid hold of the beaker. 'Allow me to pour you another cup, my dear fellow. If a mere homophone can confound you, even momentarily, then you need it...'

My hand rose instinctively to cover the cup, but too late: the steaming, murderous brew was already on its way in, and not worth stopping at the prize of a serious burn. 'But what does he mean by his next reference: Euston Station – “a special one”?' It was one of those embarrassing moments when the mind answers a question as soon as it is asked. 'Never mind, Holmes. I have it. A “special” – an unscheduled train.'

'Which,' Holmes agreed with a nod, seeming to take actual and inscrutable delight in another cup of his tea, 'since it is unlikely that a Bowery hoodlum would take an interest in what transpires along Pall Mall— ’

'Eight Pall Mall – eight *P.M.*! The special will leave Euston at eight *P.M.*, and we are meant to be on it.'

'Indeed.’” 16/17

The didactic dimension is even more perceptible in Carr's rewriting of the scene, with Holmes giving Watson all sorts of information (some of which he does not actually need to decipher the message, like the reference to New York slang; on the other hand, this is entirely consistent with Holmes's constant desire to impress the audience with his precise knowledge

⁶⁷ On the other hand, the first detection scenes of the other three novels are completely gratuitous: in *A Study in Scarlet*, Holmes “detects” Watson for the first time; in *The Sign of the Four*, Watson -or, rather, Watson's pocket watch- is again the object of Holmes' proto-investigation; in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, the detective's attention is focused on a walking stick left by a potential client (that turns out not to be the client himself, but his friend who accompanied him to the city).

of any subject related in any way to criminality), encouraging him to go further in his interpretation, and even rewarding him (though the notion of reward is highly subjective here) when he does find the right answer. Again, if we compare Holmes's ironical remarks in this extract (underlined passages) with those he makes in the source-text, the proximity between the two is even more striking. This first detection scene is not “gratuitous” either, since it is the coded telegram sent by Mycroft that sends the detective duo off to Scotland, thus truly starting the case.⁶⁸

Now why would Caleb Carr choose to have his narrative start with a scene of gratuitous detection in which Watson is the one who really does all the guesswork, even more so than in Conan Doyle's original text? In light of the novel as a whole, we think that it announces the overall importance that Watson takes in the narrative as an active character. Carr endeavours, from this first chapter onwards, to present Watson as more of Holmes's pupil than his foil, having learned from his teacher many of the tricks of the trade (here, breaking ciphers).⁶⁹ Later, on the train, Watson himself assumes the mantle of teacher in order to explain to the reader every important detail of the telegraph; oddly enough, Holmes resumes his position of authority when he links the two murders (which are the object of the message) to the historic tragedy of David Rizzio, the titular “Italian secretary”. Holmes's new-found historical knowledge is again referred to at the end of the book, when he manages to deduce the presence of a catapult in the hands of their enemies simply by observing the traces it left on the two bodies.

It appears that the scenes of gratuitous detection in *The House of Silk* and *The Italian Secretary* are quite different from one another; it is of course because both narratives have a very different relationship with the canon, as we will see in a third part. The case of Michael Dibdin's narrative presents us with another problem altogether, as there is apparently no scene of gratuitous detection, at least according to our template; nonetheless, let us see what we can make of it.

c) Dibdin: refusing the tradition

Of course, Dibdin's choice to begin his novel without a scene of gratuitous detection is not innocent, and participates in a greater strategy of de-familiarization, two examples of which we have already mentioned: the fake foreword by the editors, which sheds light on the

⁶⁸ In another interesting parallel, Mycroft's telegram puts Holmes and Watson (and, obviously, the reader) on the wrong scent, since it implies that there is a possible threat to the Queen's safety orchestrated by German spies; none of this proves to be true, however, and the novel quickly gets rid of any political dimension to become a full-fledged Gothic crime fiction.

⁶⁹ Watson's experience with bodies is later put to use at the morgue, and he even goes in disguise with Holmes to reconnoitre the headquarters of the villains.

scandal that the story is supposed to have caused, and Dibdin's refusal to imitate Conan Doyle's style, explained through the notion that what the reader has in their hands is one of Watson's raw accounts, without Conan Doyle's embellishments and additions. But what is perhaps even more interesting is what Dibdin replaces this first scene with; consequently, let us examine again the first pages of the novel.

We have already said that the novel started with an introduction by an older Watson, writing long after the events because he feels the need to confess a terrible truth the reader does not know yet. In a traditional way this time, Watson recalls the temporal context of the case he wants to write about, mentioning the time he spent with Holmes and some of their important cases (*A Study in Scarlet* and *The Speckled Band* p.17, and *The Sign of the Four* pp.20/21) before getting to the matter at hand. Such an introduction is always interesting, because it offers the new author the possibility to give a different version of one of the canonical accounts, or add elements to it; here, the most important part of the chapter is when Watson mentions his conversation with Holmes concerning his own marriage to Mary Morstan, echoing the end of *The Sign of the Four*. The original perspective was already quite bleak, with Holmes failing to congratulate Watson on the grounds that marriage and women are irrational things, and the sense of inescapable repetition brought about by the ending which sees Holmes injecting himself another dose of cocaine; Dibdin does not change much, but emphasizes Watson's uneasiness at the time of the narration and his guilt at the time of the enunciation, giving the whole passage an ominous tone. Let us compare the two extracts:

“I fear that it may be the last investigation in which I shall have the chance of studying your methods. Miss Morstan has done me the honour to accept me as a husband in prospective.’

Holmes gave a most dismal groan. ‘I feared as much,’ said he. ‘I really cannot congratulate you.’

I was a little hurt. ‘Have you any reason to be dissatisfied with my choice?’ I asked.

‘Not at all. I think she is one of the most charming young ladies I ever met, and might have been most useful in such work as we have been doing. [...] But love is an emotional thing, and whatever is emotional is opposed to that true, cold reason which I place above all things.’

[...]

‘You have done all the work in this business. I get a wife out of it, Jones gets the credit; pray what remains for you?’

‘For me,’ said Sherlock Holmes, ‘there still remains the cocaine bottle.’ And he stretched his long, white hand up for it.” *SIGN* 204

“[In] due course I was able to announce my engagement to Holmes.

His response **stunned** me. I had not expected him to be overjoyed at the news, but I was astonished by his inability even to dissemble **his displeasure**. To this day I can still hear his groan, and **the cold words** that

followed.

'I really cannot congratulate you.'

This remark was, to say the least, **extremely embarrassing**. I hardly knew how to reply. In the end, though, I managed to come up with some banter to the effect that everyone concerned seemed to have done well out of Holmes's success in the Sholto case, except Holmes himself.

'You have done all the work in this business,' I cried. 'As it is, I get a wife out of it, and the police gets all the credit. Pray what remains for you?'

His face was set and **his voice bleak** as he replied.

'For me there remains the cocaine-bottle.'

How could I have overlooked the implied appeal? How could I fail to understand? I am staggered by the extent of my blindness. But then perhaps nothing I could have done would have made any difference. Perhaps what was to happen would have happened in any case. Perhaps its sources were in deeper and darker regions than those over which I ever had any influence. Perhaps. Perhaps.

This is what I tell myself. My heart tells me that **I betrayed my closest friend in the hour of his need**, and I know no way to answer."

The Last Sherlock Holmes Story 21

As we have made clear with the underlined passages, the two extracts are very similar, with Dibdin echoing Conan Doyle sometimes word for word. It is true that the scene is already striking enough in *The Sign of the Four*, but as we analyse more closely the second extract, Dibdin's strategy of re-appropriation becomes more visible. The passages that we have put in bold are probably the best examples of the changes Dibdin brought to the original extract, as they emphasize Watson's perception of Holmes's reaction and his feelings, which are either downplayed or absent in the original text. By contrast, Dibin's Watson is much more human, and his reactions are much more understandable, than the original: from "a little hurt" by Holmes's initial response in Conan Doyle's text, Watson becomes "stunned" and "extremely [embarrassed]". Similarly, Holmes's recognition of Mary Morstan's qualities, and the explanation he gives for his disappointment with Watson's marriage are both cut from Dibdin's version of the scene, thus making Holmes's reaction visceral rather than intellectual; this is particularly interesting in a novel like *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story*, since the questions of Holmes's paradoxes and of the duality between reason and emotion are at the heart of the novel, epitomized in the revelation of the character's two antagonistic personalities. Moreover, whereas the end of *The Sign of the Four* did not feature any reaction to Holmes's bleak statement on Watson's part, Dibdin elaborates on it and makes the lack of reaction at that time the source of Watson's guilt (and thus one of the key elements in the novel). On the whole, one could argue that this Dibdin's relation to the source-text in this scene is comparable to Carr's in his scene of gratuitous detection, as both authors appropriate extracts of the original canon by imbuing them with new perspectives that focus more on

Watson's perception of the events, thus prefiguring and exemplifying their work in the novel as a whole.

Furthermore, when one looks at the first chapter of *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story*, one might argue that it is then that Dibdin's version of a scene of gratuitous detection is revealed. Indeed, after the introduction we have just analysed, Watson goes on to describe Holmes's way of life and work, in much the same way as he did in the second chapter of *A Study in Scarlet*; the two major differences are that this time, Watson-narrator has way more hindsight (since he is writing long after the events, and can replace them in a wider temporal context) and that it is allegedly Watson's true voice (without Conan Doyle's intervention and his distortion of perspective) that is heard through the text. Consequently, a number of changes from what the reader is used to occur in Holmes's description; what is, perhaps, even more interesting is that this description reads very much like a scene of detection, with Watson detailing the reasons behind Holmes's addiction to drugs through an analytical process, examining closely its different stages and chronicling the detective's downfall. The explanation given by Dibdin is essentially the same as the one given by Conan Doyle (*i.e.* that Holmes takes drugs because there is no interesting work available), but Watson's description of the circumstances that lead to this state of affairs is more detailed and, therefore, more convincing, than Conan Doyle's one-time attempt at making his detective a drug addict.⁷⁰ The second part of the chapter also recalls *A Study in Scarlet* (more precisely, the beginning of the third chapter), as Holmes receives a telegram from Lestrade asking for his help (in *A Study in Scarlet*, it is from Gregson). To this, Dibdin chose to add elements that come from the tradition of the scene of gratuitous detection: as soon as Watson has finished reading the telegram aloud (as Holmes asked him to do in Conan Doyle's original text as well), the detective begins his preparations to take care of the case, and has the doctor go over a number of articles already published in different newspaper, as a means to gather evidence before Lestrade's visit. As always in such situations (one may think of the beginning of *The Valley of Fear*, which we have already analysed) Holmes has already read the papers, and remarks several times that he has an idea as to who is behind the crimes; consequently, the reader discovers the case through Watson's eyes, as he fishes through the newspaper articles under Holmes's guidance and brings forward hypotheses as to the nature of the case. Later on, when Lestrade comes in to seek Holmes's advice and brings the first letter from Jack the Ripper, Holmes is again the focus of the attention, and exerts his powers of deduction in a quite

⁷⁰ Holmes's addiction to cocaine (and morphine) is only referred to explicitly in *The Sign of the Four*, though there are hints in other stories of the canon.

traditional way, profiling the murderer from the way he writes; but in neither of those two small scenes is the detection process gratuitous, as both have a direct link to the case at hand. Again, Michael Dibdin is using the traditional templates in whatever way pleases him, and seems more inclined to go against the grain than to make a traditional adaptation.

d) Cotte and Stromboni: a mock-deduction scene with heavy implications

Before we put an end to this analysis, we must also take into account Olivier Cotte's and Jules Stromboni's adaptation. We have said earlier that the foreword and Watson's introduction were skipped, for the most part, in the graphic novel; instead, the reader was presented with a framed narrative, related by Holmes to Watson, before the doctor announced his prospective marriage to his friend. Holmes's reaction is quite similar to the one described in both Dibdin and Conan Doyle, but the scene is considerably less dramatized in Cotte's and Stromboni's version, as Holmes mocks Watson's fear for his own health by showing him that his deductive powers are still working at their full potential, and just afterwards mentioning Lestrade's wire (cf Appendix IV).

The fact that Holmes is actually playing a practical joke on Watson when he pretends he is deducing the identity of the person knocking on their door does not seem like much, but it is actually very interesting for the characterization of the detective in *L'ultime défi*: whereas Dibdin's Holmes was introduced, from the start, as a tragic figure, always on the verge of a mental breakdown, using cocaine as a means to evade a boring and grim reality, Cotte's and Stromboni's version of the character is much more erratic and moody, and arguably mad, as his reactions do not seem to make sense and his emotions do not last longer than a panel (as we can see in the two pages in Appendix). In fact, this behaviour is exactly that of a drug addict, with sudden fits of energy and unpredictable moods. That Cotte and Stromboni should choose precisely to parody the scene of gratuitous detection (while it was not in Dibdin) is also a way to reject the traditional holmesian adaptations, and is therefore in-keeping with their iconoclastic source material. Yet, one could also argue that it has a deeper meaning than that: despite their investigations and their living together, Watson is not able to tell when Holmes is lying from when he is telling the truth; he does not truly know Holmes yet, and the whole of *L'ultime défi* is about Watson learning the most shocking truth about his friend, and working on how to cope with it. In other words, even though this scene is funny on first reading (and it surely is meant to be funny), it becomes darker and more ominous once the reader knows what the end will be.

Oddly enough, the scene in which Lestrade comes in to discuss the Ripper's letter is

postponed to pages 36/38, and the remarks we have made for Dibdin's version apply here again. Between the two scenes, Cotte and Stromboni chose to add a sequence in which the two heroes jump into a cab (where Holmes gives Watson a briefing on the case, less detailed than the one in the book because without any confrontation of newspaper articles) and they meet Lestrade at the Scotland Yard headquarters to discuss the first murder and the arrest of a suspect, "Leather Apron". This sequence is utterly absent from the book, as the first meeting between Holmes and the police occurs after the arrest and later release of "Leather Apron", when he mockingly mentions these events to Lestrade.⁷¹ The added scene in *L'ultime défi* serves both as a reminder of Holmes's frequent oppositions with the police and as another illustration of the detective's whimsical nature (Appendix → pp30/31). Moreover, we must not omit the fact that during this scene, Holmes meets no less than three historical figures: Chief Inspector Donald Swanson and Chief Inspector Frederick George Abberline, when he discusses business with Lestrade, and John Pizer himself for interrogation. As we may recall, there was no foreword by the editors (and no mention of Conan Doyle either) in the first pages of Cotte's and Stromboni's adaptation; consequently, adding this scene which blends historical reality and fiction is probably their way of compensating for the absence of these elements before.

⁷¹ The arrest of John Pizer was a police fiasco: he was apprehended without evidence after the murders of Mary Ann Nichols and Annie Chapman, because there were rumours about a Jewish butcher nicknamed "Leather Apron" who terrorized prostitutes. It soon appeared, however, that Pizer had alibis for both murders, one of which was provided by a police officer; he was released after a few days.

All three stories feature, embedded in the narrative, a meta-literary comment on the several returns of Holmes and Watson: a return from death/jail in *The House of Silk*, a return from death/exile in *The Last Story*, and a return from the past/the world of the dead in *The Italian Secretary* (even though that affirmation should be nuanced in the context of Carr's novel, since like the ghost of Rizzio, Holmes seems to be able to walk freely between the boundaries of the worlds). As we know, Conan Doyle has tried to kill off Holmes once, only for him to return stronger than ever; even on a purely literary level, there were more stories written after Holmes's death and return than before. Ironically, the great detective even survived the death of his creator: he became available to anyone, for any purpose (even though, as we have seen, there was an official perspective on the character). Metaphorically speaking, each new addition to the legacy is a resurrection for Holmes, Watson and the other characters – this is probably why it has been used as a trope in the adaptations (that, and the fact that neo-Victorian fiction is very often concerned with questions of haunting and return of the dead or repressed). However, as we have already started to see, Holmes' literary returns take various shapes in the novels under study. Perhaps it is in the meta-literary awareness that these returns bring about that holmesian adaptations become creations in their own right, as they use a neo-Victorian perspective on Holmes and Watson to go beyond the original text and build a true reflection on our relation to the past, tradition, literature.

III – Breaking away from Conan Doyle: Holmes, Watson and metatextuality

A) *The House of Silk*: the evolution of popular fiction since Conan Doyle

As we have already started to realise, each of the four literary works under study has very particular relationship to the canon. It is time, now, to analyse in more details how the authors write back at Conan Doyle and his creation, by focusing on the elements that each work introduces into the universe of Holmes and Watson. The study of adaptations is a difficult one, and it seems to us that it is only by doing this can we stop thinking in terms of faithfulness to a source material, and that we may tell whether an adaptation is a mere variation or a true creation. We shall start with Anthony Horowitz's *The House of Silk*; at this stage in our research, it would appear that it is perhaps the most canonical of the four works we are analysing, not only because it has been commissioned by Conan Doyle Estate, Ltd.: its use of canonical *topoi* (such as the introduction by an older Watson and the scene of gratuitous detection) and its depiction of the relationship between the doctor and his friend, as well as the references made to the chronology and the other cases investigated by the duo, participate in marking the narrative as a holmesian sequel in the full sense of the term, merely repeating the patterns established by ACD without bringing in anything new. However, we must not be fooled by this seemingly conventional approach to the canon: Horowitz's novel is a neo-Victorian production in its own right, and the author's additions to the canon are indeed numerous. We will focus on three key elements in Horowitz's neo-Victorian approach to the canon: what we have called the blending of influences, linked to the emergence of other preoccupations and other discourses that were repressed in the Victorian era (mostly concerning sexuality and class awareness, through the importance given to children in the novel), and finally the relationship between Holmes and Watson as a metaphor of the contemporary author's relationship to Victorian literature.

1] The blending of influences:

a) Canonical shortcomings: bringing social preoccupations to the adventures of Holmes and Watson

As it is made abundantly clear by Julie Sanders in *Adaptation and Appropriation*, the most part of the adaptations critic's job is to identify the source-text of one adaptation; this source-text may be explicitly featured in the target-text, or implicitly; it may be present throughout the whole of the adaptation, or from time to time, or simply at one moment; the knowledge of this source-text may be indispensable to fully understand the target-text, or

relatively superfluous. It is also extremely common in adaptation studies to find echoes of more than one source-text in one single work; after all, as Gérard Genette phrased it: “when one really loves texts, one must love (at least) two of them together”.⁷² One can easily understand why: the confrontation of the two original texts in the adaptation may produce new meaning, especially if those two texts are from different authors and/or different spatial and temporal contexts. In the majority of adaptations, however (if we are to believe our experience as readers and Julie Sanders’s analysis), one source-text predominates; the other sources are present sporadically. In the case of *The House of Silk*, the first time the presence of a non-holmesian source-text can be felt is at the very beginning of chapter six, as Watson endeavours to describe the city of London in more details as he and Holmes are searching for a missing child:

“In 1890, the year of which I write, there were some five and a half million people in the six hundred square miles of the area known as the Metropolitan Police District of London and then, as always, those two constant neighbours, wealth and poverty were living uneasily side by side. It sometimes occurs to me now, having witnessed so many momentous changes across the years, that I should have described at greater length the sprawling chaos of the city in which I lived, perhaps in the manner of Gissing – or Dickens fifty years before. I can only say in my own defence that I was a biographer, not a historian or a journalist, and that my adventures invariably led me to the more rarefied walks of life – fine houses, hotels, private clubs, schools and offices of government. It is true that Holmes’s clients came from all classes, but (and perhaps someone might one day have to pause to consider the significance of this) the more interesting crimes, the ones I chose to relate, were nearly always committed by the well-to-do.”⁷⁴

These two references are quite intriguing here; Charles Dickens hardly needs any presentation, but it might prove necessary for George Gissing. Though largely forgotten today outside of Great Britain, Gissing was a prominent novelist in the 1880s and 1890s, and one of the major literary figures of British naturalism (and later realism). As it is made clear by Watson in this passage, Gissing is remembered for his descriptions of the lower classes in London and of their struggle with issues like poverty, lack of jobs, and poor living conditions.⁷³ The topical proximity between his work and Dickens’s is clear, even without Watson to make the link explicit. Now, why does Watson (and, indeed, Horowitz) evoke both writers at this point in the narrative since, as Watson puts it, the lower classes are relatively

⁷² “Quand on aime vraiment les textes, on doit pouvoir aimer en même temps deux (ou plusieurs !) à la fois » Gérard Genette, op.cit.

⁷³ George Orwell, who admired Gissing deeply, wrote that the central theme of most of Gissing novel could be stated in three words : « not enough money » (“George Gissing,” Tribune, 2 April 1943, reprinted in *Two Wasted Years*).

absent from the majority of Holmes's investigations? The beginning of the paragraph that follows gives an ambiguous answer to that question:

“However, it is necessary now to reflect upon the lower depths of the **great cauldron of London**, what Gissing called ‘the nether world’, to understand the impossibility of the task that faced us.” (ibid.)

The choice of words here is particularly interesting, as it seems to indicate that Watson is incapable to continue his story on his own; “it is necessary” for him to conjure up the shadows of two predecessors. This must give us pause, as the number of hypertextual references in the original Holmesian canon was very limited: only Poe and Gaboriau were mentioned by name (and only once, in *A Study in Scarlet*). Even when Holmes and Watson discussed the rules of writing, no other author was referred to explicitly and the debate remained highly theoretical. As we have said, it is true that Holmes was sometimes prone to quoting classics (*A Study in Scarlet* ends with a quote by Horace, *The Sign of the Four* with a quote by Goethe); Watson himself, however, always appeared confident enough of his narrative powers to reject any explicit tutelage. As a figure of narrative authority, Watson exerts full control over his tales and never seems to be at a loss to describe or explain the events that have occurred (even though, as a character, he always needs Holmes's guidance and explanation); even when he made more daring experimentations with his narrative, he never felt the need to make the novelty explicit. So why would he be confessing his inability to carry out his narrative alone here? Because it is no longer Conan Doyle who is writing the canon. Let us be more clear: we think that this is the first moment when Horowitz's own sensibility as a 21st-century writer manifests itself explicitly in the novel, precisely because he has identified what he deems a shortcoming in the original canon by confronting its narrative strategies to a topical area that Conan Doyle had never really explored: a more social approach to the lives of the lower classes, especially the children. When faced with such an issue, Horowitz, being a 21st-century writer with a narrative set in the Victorian era, chose to place his novel under the shadows of other emblematic writers of the era he was writing about and that he deemed more fit to discuss the subject (*i.e.* Dickens and Gissing). It is also interesting that, having reacted this way, Horowitz immediately repressed this burst of 21st-century literary awareness on both occasions, in two different ways: the first time by having Watson justify himself when faced with what he rightfully sees as an attack on his credibility as an accomplished writer (“I can only say in my own defence that I was a biographer, not a historian or a journalist”); the second time, in a more implicit way, by echoing Gissing with an indirect reference to one of the first metaphors he used to describe London, at the very

beginning of *A Study in Scarlet* (“the great cauldron of London” here, “London, that great cesspool into which all the loungers and idlers of the Empire are irresistibly drained” in *A Study in Scarlet* p.4). Watson continues nonetheless his tribute to the two social writers for three good paragraphs, until he has a third and final fit of authorial pride at the end of the following page:

“Come, Watson, that's quite enough of this. Get back to the story. Holmes would never have stood for it had he been alive!” 75

This third reaction comes after a particularly emotional passage about “the greatest curse of [the] age, the carelessness that had put tens of thousands of children out on the streets” (*ibid.*), that is to say exactly the sort of social diatribe that one would never have found in the canon (in spite of Watson's genuinely sympathetic nature). From Holmes's and Watson's recurring arguments about the rules of fiction writing, it is true that one could infer that Holmes would never have defended such a digression (since it is, strictly speaking, useless for the plot); however, one cannot help but feel like it is more Horowitz's own sensibility than Watson's that is speaking here unmediated, and like “Holmes” could be easily replaced with “Conan Doyle” in the sentence...

Nonetheless, the deed is done: from that moment on, Watson's narrative in *The House of Silk* repeatedly refers these two authors, especially Dickens, as the investigation centres on two child-characters and on places that echo some of the best-known passages in Dickens's works.

b) Dickensian echoes: a new perspective on the Baker Street Irregulars

As we have mentioned before, the plot of *The House of Silk* is in fact made of two intertwined sub-plots, to which Watson gives two different titles in his introduction. The first is entitled “The Man in the Flat Cap”, and sees an art dealer named Edmund Carstairs stalked by a mysterious character wearing a flat cap whose identity he is not certain of, and who is later found murdered in a hotel room without any clear reason; Holmes and Watson quickly learn that the whole affair is connected to a gang war in America, in which Carstairs was unwillingly caught up. The second adventure, “The House of Silk”, concerns a mysterious criminal organization whose purpose is unclear and whose means seem unlimited, known only by the trademark silken ribbon they leave tied to their victim's bodies. While the first story is very canonical in its structure (it mostly reminds one of *The Valley of Fear*, with a touch of *A Study in Scarlet*, *The Dancing Men* and perhaps *The Hound of the Baskervilles* for the final revelation), the second story is much more original, as it breaches topics which

Conan Doyle (consciously or not) avoided in the canon: mainly, all the difficulties that poor children living in London were faced with. As we know, the number of child-characters in the canon is extremely limited, and most of them do not even have names (the Baker Street Irregulars, for example, are only referred to as a whole, with the exception of their leader Wiggins; even their exact number does not seem to be important enough for Watson to mention in either of the three adventures in which they make an appearance);⁷⁴ when they do, they merely appear as elements of an investigation, and are treated as such by Holmes and -surprisingly enough- by Watson himself: they hardly ever utter a word and might not even be present when Holmes and Watson investigate; they are merely one of several details that defines the victim or the client, placed on the same level as his height, hair colour or career. One might argue that this rule knows three exceptions: in *The Yellow Face*, *The Missing Three-Quarters* and *The Priory School*, a child -or, in the second and third cases, children- are at the heart of the plot. However, Grant Munro's mulatto child does not speak a word in *The Yellow Face*, and is treated like an object more than anything else (an object of affection, but an object nonetheless); and the protagonists of *The Missing Three-Quarters* and *The Priory School* are teenagers more than actual children, and therefore treated as young men by the adults. Consequently, the sub-plot that concerns the House of Silk departs quite strikingly from canonical templates and topics. Yet, perhaps because it is his first time writing a novel set in the Victorian era, Horowitz does feel the need to evoke writers that are often seen as precursors or examples of social realism: Gissing and Dickens. Despite his (rather heavy-handed) insistence on explicitly quoting Gissing in the passage we have just mentioned, it really is Dickens's shadow that one can feel hovering over most scenes, mainly because Dickens is remembered for his many child-protagonists (Oliver Twist, Pip, David Copperfield...). The first scene we will analyse is the arrival of the Baker Street Irregulars in Holmes's rooms in chapter four:

“there was a loud ring at the front door, followed by the patter of many feet on the stairs. It was a sound that I remembered well, so I was fully prepared when about half a dozen street Arabs burst into the room and formed themselves into something resembling an orderly line, with the tallest and oldest of them shouting them into shape.

'Wiggins!' I exclaimed, for I remembered his name. 'I had not expected to see you again.'

'Mr 'olmes sent us a message, sir, summoning us on a matter of the greatest hurgency,' Wiggins replied, 'And when Mr 'olmes calls, we come, so 'ere we are!'" 51/52

This introduction of these children in the book is the perfect example of what we have

⁷⁴ The three adventures are *A Study in Scarlet*, *The Sign of the Four* and *The Crooked Man*.

just said about the way they were usually portrayed in the canon: Watson's way of looking at them is not only extremely patronizing, it also brings to light the kind of prejudiced attitude many middle-class Victorians could have about poor children. What is interesting, here, is that there is no trace of compassion in Watson's mind when he looks at them, unlike the passage we have quoted before, as if he felt a righteous indignation when thinking about the harsh living conditions of the “street Arabs” as he calls them (a phrase Horowitz picked up directly from the canon), but failed to act it out. Watson's words betray a class consciousness that is stronger than any other feeling he might experience when looking at the Irregulars, a mixture of amusement, condescension and indifference, defined the stereotypes about the poor and the uneducated: they are not able of any real discipline or order (they need to be “[shouted] into shape” and cannot form an “orderly line”, only a parody of it), the only authority they know is based on physical strength and age rather than on education or intelligence (the one who leads is “the tallest and oldest” of the group)⁷⁵, they are numerous but do not live long enough to be remembered or even taken into account (once again, Watson does not even bother counting them properly, only giving an estimation of the number; furthermore, he quite plainly states that he was not expecting to see Wiggins again, and seems to take pride in the mere fact that he remembered the boy's name). In short, in Watson's eyes, they are a swarm of interchangeable beings without any real individuality (apart from Wiggins, whose physical attributes make him, quite literally, stand out), only good at answering Holmes's orders and carrying out some simple tasks for him, while he attends to more important matters. Watson's prejudiced perspective is particularly visible in the way he describes their physical appearances:

“[Holmes] referred to them as the Irregulars. A scruffier, more ragged bunch would be hard to imagine, boys between the ages of eight and fifteen, held together by dirt and grime, their clothes so cut about and stitched that it would be impossible to say to how many other children they must have at some time belonged. Wiggins himself was wearing an adult jacket that had been cut in half, a strip removed from the middle and the top, and the bottom put together again. Several of the boys were barefooted. Only one, I noted, was a little smarter and better fed than the others, his clothes slightly less threadbare, and I wondered what wickedness – pickpocketing, perhaps, or burglary – had furnished him with the means not just to survive but, in his own way, to prosper.” 52

The overall impression that these children have left Watson with are a sense of utter chaos, and an impossibility to describe them accurately: the only thing he can stress are details that shock his middle-class way of living, mainly how dirty and unevenly dressed they

⁷⁵ This remark is even more striking when one thinks of the character of Ross. We will allude to it again when we analyse the next extract.

are. However, as we have seen before, even the mention of the few who are barefooted, or the fact that some of them are extremely young, do not seem to elicit any compassion in Watson -at this point in the narrative, anyway. In fact, it is rather the reverse: when he singles one boy out, because he is better-dressed than the others, he immediately and quite mechanically links this increase in wealth to a life of “wickedness”. In his own way, though he appears more paternalistic and perhaps slightly kinder to the children, Watson is just as prejudiced as Mrs Hudson, who reacts to the arrival of the Irregulars with unconcealed anger:

“I won't have it, Mr Holmes. I've told you before. This is a respectable house in which to invite a gang of ragamuffins. Heaven knows what diseases they'll have brought in with them – nor what items of silver and linen will be gone when they depart.” (*ibid.*)

But the character who is primarily concerned is still Holmes himself, who acts in the canon as the Irregulars' employer. Let us see how he treats them in *The House of Silk*:

“Wiggins! I've told you before. I will not have the house invaded in this way. In future, you alone will report to me. But since you are here and have brought with you the entire gang, listen carefully to my instructions.

[...]

You must visit every pawnbroker in the district, describing the man and the jewellery which he may have attempted to sell.' Holmes reached into his pocket. 'My rates are the same as always. A shilling each and a guinea for whoever finds what I am looking for.” 52/53

Whereas Holmes does not seem to treat Wiggins and the boys with the same condescension and concealed disgust Watson and Mrs Hudson feel, he does not show any compassion either. As the underline passage indicates clearly, Holmes is their usual employer, and he treats them in a very professional way, without any regards to their ages or living conditions: he enlists their help from time to time and pays them (quite well); in exchange he demands discipline, as can be seen from his first lines in the dialogue. There is absolutely nothing in Holmes's speech that indicates that he is speaking to children; then again, we have already mentioned Holmes's tendency to treat other human beings as functions or objects rather than people in the canon, and Horowitz is very much part of the tradition here.

However, Horowitz quickly challenges both Holmes's and Watson's perspectives by confronting them directly to the lives of the children and to the death of one in particular, Ross. We have already quoted Watson's reaction when Ross disappears in the first two pages of chapter six: for the first time in his accounts (and, perhaps, in his life), he truly pauses to reflect on how difficult it is to grow up poor in London, and as we have seen some of his prejudices seem to slowly melt away. He does not feature Holmes's reaction until later in the

narrative however, after they are called by Lestrade to identify a dead body on the banks of the Thames -a body which turns out to be Ross's. Oddly enough, as we will see now, it is precisely Lestrade who triggers Holmes's reaction:

“[Holmes] turned back to Lestrade. 'Thank you for calling me out and informing me of this.'

'I hoped you might be able to shed some light on the matter. It may be, after all, that this is your fault.'

'Fault?' Holmes jerked round as though he had been stung.

'I warned you about mixing with these children. You employed the boy. You set him on the trail of a known criminal. I grant you, he may have had his own ideas and they were the ruin of him. But this is the result.'

I cannot say if Lestrade was being deliberately provocative but his words had an effect on Holmes that I was able to witness for myself on the journey back to Baker Street. He had sunk into the corner of the hansom and for much of the way he sat in silence, refusing to meet my eyes. His skin seemed to have stretched itself over his cheekbones and he appeared more gaunt than ever, as if he had been struck down by some virulent disease.

[...]

'It may be that Lestrade was right,' he said at length. 'Certainly, I have used my Baker Street Irregulars without much thought or consideration. It amused me to have them lined up in front of me, to give them a shilling or two, but I have never wantonly put them in harm's way, Watson. You know that. And yet I stand accused of dilettantism and must plead guilty. Wiggins, Ross and the rest of them were nothing to me, just as they are nothing to the society that has abandoned them on the streets, and it never occurred to me that this horror might be the result of my actions.'” 97/98

This extract shows us two of the most striking departures from Conan Doyle that we have witnessed yet in Horowitz's adaptation. Lestrade, who in the canon is portrayed as a relatively unpleasant man, easily angered by Holmes's frequent mockeries, and often more interested in his career than in the actual investigation;⁷⁶ here, he is briefly presented as better -or, at least, more humane, more sympathetic- than the great detective. This twist on the character, though slightly shocking at first, is part of a greater strategy of rehabilitation by Watson in the book, who at one point apologises to Lestrade for having presented him in such an unflattering light,⁷⁷ but it is also made more natural by the fact that Lestrade, in *The House of Silk*, is presented more or less as a complementary figure to Holmes: unlike Holmes who sees investigations as purely intellectual problems, Lestrade is more down-to-earth because he has to do the real field work; it is therefore logical that the inspector has more empathy for the lower classes, because he interacts with them on a daily basis. Lestrade's logic, as it is illustrated in the first underlined passage, is shown here as being more valid than Holmes's because it is based on first-hand experience, and takes into account contextual information

⁷⁶ This much can be deduced solely from the presentation of the character in *A Study in Scarlet*.

⁷⁷ We will analyse this in more details in a few pages, when we talk about the « Holmes effect ».

about society, economics, criminal behaviours (etc.), which are exactly the kind of data Holmes finds unworthy of his attention, as he plainly states to Watson at the beginning of *A Study in Scarlet*. Holmes himself is a logician, but never pauses to consider what consequences his choices and his actions may have on other characters; he acknowledges this in the last sentence of the extract.

Precisely, the second striking departure from the canon is Holmes's increasingly emotional *mea culpa* at the end of the extract. Watson's description is very interesting here, because it shows us that the detective is so shocked by what has happened that he has a physical reaction to it -a reaction in which we can find literal echoes of Holmes's fake symptoms in *The Dying Detective*, in which he was allegedly on the brink of death. Watson's description of Holmes is at the same time very visual and highly unrealistic (because hyperbolic), but this illustrates precisely how new it is even to Watson that Holmes should express such an emotion as shame, and so powerfully. This new feeling brings about a moment of epiphany for Holmes, as is made clear by his speech at the end of the extract; what is interesting is that the speech may also create a hypertextual epiphany for the reader who pauses to really consider the nature of the relationship between Holmes and his Irregulars, in the light of the events and of the recent references made by Horowitz. Indeed, when one thinks of an adult employing poor but sly children for odd jobs, often breaking the boundaries of the law, one cannot help but compare it with another infamous figure in popular fiction: the main antagonist in Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, Fagin the Jew. The comparison is never made explicit in Horowitz's novel, but comparing Holmes with Fagin sheds a new light on the former's interactions with the Irregulars. Fagin, of course, is remembered as one of the most striking villains in 19th-century fiction: he is an old man who employs children for pickpocketing (among other criminal activities) in exchange for food, shelter and/or money. Some critics have seen in him a perfect incarnation of the shortcomings of the early capitalistic society: a society that encourages crime and survival of the fittest, and that robs children of their childhood and innocence -indeed, Fagin's influence in *Oliver Twist* seems to contaminate every character he is associated with (except Oliver) and shape them into younger copies of himself, through a mixture of flattery (as he keeps telling Oliver that he will be "a great man" or "the greatest man of the time" if he follows his advice) and menace (mostly physical threats, as he is seen beating children up several times in the novel). Most of all, Fagin is treating the children not as human beings or individual, but as a workforce; in his eyes, no one is irreplaceable because there will always be children on the streets to whom he can teach the job. As we have seen, Watson also repeatedly mentions the number of children

in the streets, first implicitly as it is part of his prejudiced gaze, then explicitly, when he identifies it as the reason why his gaze is prejudiced:

“it would have been impossible to distinguish [Wiggins] in a crowd. It may be this was why it was so easy to ignore the plight of these children. There were so many of them. They all looked the same.” (78)

What is even more interesting is that the idea of the ever-growing number of children in the streets belittling the value of their lives as individuals is picked up quite seriously by one character in *The House of Silk*, and this character is Wiggins himself, the chief of the Irregulars. When Holmes asks him to find Ross, and tries to appeal to his sense of comradeship, Wiggins grimly answers:

“e was nothing to me, Mr 'olmes. Why would I care if 'e lived or died? If Ross were never seen again, there are twenty more who would take 'is place.” (*ibid.*)

By having a character that is both a child and a positive figure voice the exact same arguments Fagin uses in *Oliver Twist*, Horowitz shows the extent of the de-humanization of children in London at that time, and also how the mechanics of prejudices work: Holmes and Watson initially tolerate the presence of children in the streets because they are not directly concerned with the issue and because, like Fagin, they benefit from this situation. In the extract we have studied when Holmes gives his orders to the Irregulars, this much is clear; moreover, the reader is not yet aware of the hypertextual allusion to Fagin, because Holmes's, Watson's and even Mrs Hudson's points of view have not been challenged yet, and are still presented as valid (as they were in the canon) at this point in the narrative.⁷⁸

However, after the discovery of Ross's body, everything changes as Holmes himself begins to question his attitude to the children, for he is now responsible for the death of one of them, and understands that he has been wrong to treat them that way.⁷⁹ This epiphany is, essentially, the difference between the detective and Fagin; however, the hypertextual allusion does not stop at that point and resurfaces at several key moments in the text. Later in the book, Holmes is indirectly responsible for the murder of Ross's elder sister Sally (he is drugged and forced to shoot her) and, for that, he is tried and sent to jail; in *Oliver Twist*,

⁷⁸ Moreover, the Baker Street Irregulars are fan-favourites and are often present in the adaptations (and often as comical characters), so much as one does not pause to consider the true nature of their situations.

⁷⁹ Let us not forget, however, that if it is true that there is a Dickensian subtext here, it is introduced into the narrative by Horowitz, who is a 21st-century writer for children and young adults ; consequently, his reaction to the way Holmes treats children in the canon is logical, but it does not mean that Conan Doyle was an insensitive person that was in favour of child labour. As his memoirs reveal, he was very much aware of the issue, but he was also aware of the reality of the times ; creating the Baker Street Irregulars was, perhaps, a touch of realism.

Fagin was indirectly responsible for the death of another young woman, Nancy, a crime that also causes him to be jailed (and later executed). However, as is made clear by the deaths of both Ross and Sally, the worst enemy of the Irregulars is not a life of petty crime (the kind of life Fagin, Monks or Bill Sikes represented in *Oliver Twist* and that Holmes apparently allows in the canon) but the criminal organisation that quite literally preys on them and robs them of their innocence, the titular House of Silk. If the organisation does (arguably) more damage to the children than Fagin himself, their signature object is nonetheless another hypertextual reference to the character: we may recall that the first time Fagin appears in *Oliver Twist* (at the end of chapter eight), he is obsessively counting the silk handkerchiefs that his employees have brought him, and he is repeatedly associated with the items in the scenes that follow, as the reader understands that they are at the heart of his trade: he has the children steal them, then make them unidentifiable by removing the initials, then he sells them again. In *The House of Silk*, when Ross's body is discovered on pages 96/97, not only has the boy been *beaten* to death (a punishment Fagin and his associates use a lot in *Oliver Twist*), but the only item that the police has found on him is a white silk ribbon that was tied to his wrist. Of course, here, the silk is an indication of wealth -the members and clients of the House of Silk all belong to the upper class- but one cannot help but see it as a reference to Dickens's text, especially as the discovery of Ross's body is the event that starts the second sub-plot of the novel, the one that is more explicitly concerned with children.

c) The Thames as a hypertextual space:

Precisely, we would like to argue that the scene in which Holmes and Watson examine Ross's body is a turning point on more than one level, and one of the most hypertextual passages in the text, as Horowitz re-appropriates canonical characters by confronting them to the space of the river Thames:

“We put on our coats and left at once, taking a cab over Southwark Bridge, crossing the three great cast-iron arches that span the river from Cheapside. Lestrade was waiting for us on the south bank, standing with a group of policemen who were clustered around what looked, from a distance, like a small heap of discarded rags. The sun was shining, but it was once again bitterly cold and the Thames water had never been crueller, the grey waves beating monotonously at the shore. We descended a spiral staircase of grey metal that twisted down from the road, and walked over the mud and shingle. It was low tide and the river seemed to have shrunk back, as if in distaste at what happened here. There was a steamboat pier jutting out a short distance away with a few passengers waiting, stamping their hands, their breaths frosting in the air. They seemed utterly divorced from the scene that presented itself to us. They belonged to life. Here there was only death.”
95

First of all we must remember that the Thames was a space that Conan Doyle hardly used at all in the canon, except on one occasion: the boat chase at the end of *The Sign of the Four*, in which the two criminals try to escape justice by leaving London and lose the police in the marshlands. That Conan Doyle should choose it as the location of the first body directly connected to the House of Silk is therefore not a reference to the canon; however, the description of the river banks, and the emphasis put on the filth (both in this extract, with the reference to the mud and the inescapable presence of the colour grey) and the first vision of the body as “a small heap of discarded rags” may be interpreted as another Dickensian echo, this time of the beginning of *Our Mutual Friend*, which sees Gaffer and Lizzie Hexam scavenging on the Thames and encountering the body of one John Harmon, an event which proves to be one of the key elements of the plot. In both cases, the Thames is explicitly linked to a form of closure, of certainty, bringing about the end of the interrogations for other characters as to the fate of Ross (in *The House of Silk*) and John Harmon (in *Our Mutual Friend*). But the two bodies have undergone a transformation in the Thames, which has marked them as palimpsests, for which several interpretations are superimposed: in *Our Mutual Friend*, the body is interpreted as John Harmon's body because of the papers he was carrying in his pockets; this interpretation is eventually proved wrong when the real John Harmon (who has taken other identities and disguises in the meantime) reveals himself towards the end of the novel. The case is slightly different for Ross, as there is no deception, but his identity is nonetheless questioned throughout the passage: after all, Holmes and Watson are called by Lestrade to identify the body. However, as we will argue now, even when his identity as Ross Dixon is ascertained, the body still proves to be the object of different discourses, superimposed on it by the different actors of the scene. The first interpretation we have is Watson's, when he describes the state of the body:

“The boy had been beaten brutally. His ribs had been smashed, his arms, his legs, each one of his fingers. Looking at those dreadful injuries, I knew at once that they had all been inflicted methodically, one at a time, and that death, for Ross, would have been a long tunnel of pain. Finally, at the end of it all, his throat had been cut so savagely that his head had almost been separated from his neck. I had seen dead bodies before, both with Holmes and during my time as an army surgeon, but I had never seen anything as dreadful as this, and I found it far beyond understanding that any human being could have done this to a thirteen-year-old boy.” 96

The vision of the boy's body in Watson elicits compassion, but also a sort of fascination for the inhumanity with which he imagines the boy has been dealt with: that much is made clear by the emphasis on the physical details of the injuries, and a description which is as

methodical as the death sentence enacted on Ross. By insisting this much on the horror of the scene, and stressing his inability to cope with what he is seeing (through the repeated use of the adverb “never”), Watson is explicitly marking the scene as a unique event in his whole career. In other words, he is -albeit unconsciously- using Ross's death to shock the reader and trigger a reaction of empathy on his behalf, a feeling which neither Watson nor the reader had experienced for the character when he was alive. One could even argue that Watson is, in fact, being hypocritical here, in much the same way as one could have argued he was in the first extract we have studied when he ranted against “the greatest curse of [the] age”: Ross dead, he can be remembered and mourned, but he does not stand as a living reminder of the consequences of Watson's (and his contemporaries') inaction and disinterest. This reading may even be implicitly encouraged by Horowitz, since he does not show us Watson taking any direct action to help the children in the rest of the novel -unlike Holmes who, from this moment on, makes the investigation personal, going even so far as to put his own life and reputation in danger in the pursuit of the criminal.

The second discourse that is superimposed on Ross's body is that of his murderers, the titular House of Silk. While the reason behind Ross's murder, its link to the other investigation or even what the House of Silk really is remain unknown at that moment in the narrative, the body of the child is meant to be -and perceived as- a statement on their part. Incidentally, our terminology is flawed here: their discourse was the first to have left its mark upon the body, and even Watson's description of the body is, in fact, nothing more than the interpretation of that first discourse. Everything, from the way Ross's body is displayed, to the cold, mechanical violence that Watson infers from the injuries he describes, has been carefully planned by the murderers; nothing, however, is more eloquent than the unmistakable mark they have left on the body:

“one of the policemen knelt down and took hold of one of the small, broken, arms. The sleeve of his shirt fell back to reveal a white ribbon, knotted around the boy's wrist. 'The fabric is new,' Lestrade said. 'It's a good quality silk from the look of it. And see – its is untouched by blood or by any of this Thames filth. I would say, therefore, that it was placed on the boy after he was killed, as some sort of sign.'
'The House of Silk!' I exclaimed.” 96/97

The signature proves to be so eloquent that even Lestrade, who has never heard of the House of Silk, identifies it as a message; Watson himself who, until that moment, has only heard the name without knowing what it means, immediately makes the link between the item and the entity that placed it there. In terms of power, the House of Silk has thus succeeded in

depriving Ross from everything: his life, obviously, but even his identity and his significance as an individual; in death, Ross's body is a mere object that, through the addition of this white ribbon, is appropriated by the House of Silk, which can use him in whichever way they please (in this case, as a means to convey a message). Horowitz is being very clever here, as he implicitly puts in this crime scene many clues as to the true nature of the criminal organisation and its activity: a group of wealthy people (who use “good quality silk” and, on a metaphorical level, do everything they can to stay “untouched by blood or any of this Thames filth”) that quite literally possesses the bodies of children, especially boys, to satisfy their every need.

While both Lestrade and Watson eventually come to the conclusion that the silken ribbon -and, in fact, the body of the child as a whole- constitutes a message, they fail to understand it, because they do not possess the information that is needed to decipher it. That task is, as always, attributed to Holmes, which is logical since we understand that he obviously is the recipient that was intended by the House of Silk, as even Lestrade seems to understand when he says: “I hoped you might be able to shed some light in the matter. It may be, after all, that this is your fault” (97). The third discourse we have on Ross's body is therefore Holmes's, but unlike what is usually the case in the canon when Holmes is confronted to a crime scene, the detective's response is delayed here: he does not stroll about with panache with his magnifying glass in his hand, drawing Lestrade's attention to a seemingly useless detail, then walking away with a knowing grin. In fact, Holmes hardly talks at all in the extract, and when he does he is not leading the conversation but reacting to other characters' words: formally identifying the body as Ross's, validating Watson's association between the ribbon and the House of Silk, or echoing (literally) Lestrade when the inspector blames him for Ross's death. Both the boy's death and the realisation of the part he played in it seem to turn Holmes briefly into a passive character -and he remains so until he goes back to his own comfort zone in Baker Street, as we have already seen. Being back in his lodgings seem bring back his old self, and it is only there and then that he is finally able to -partially- decipher the message that the House of Silk has left him. However, it is clear that Holmes is still shaken, because he almost admits that he does not know for sure what the message means: the chapter ends with Holmes saying: “If this was directed to me as a challenge, it is one I now accept. [...] And I tell you, Watson, that I shall make them rue the day it was sent.” (p.100) The use of the “if” rather than an unequivocal affirmation shows the reader that Holmes is, in fact, not sure of what the message means. In hindsight, it may be worth to note that this is a complete misinterpretation on his part, both because the message was intended as

a warning, not a challenge, and because the other silk ribbon that was sent directly to Holmes was in fact not sent by the House of Silk but by Moriarty, who wanted to draw the detective's attention to the matter. Here again, Horowitz plays cleverly with the reader's expectations, as he shows them the impact emotion has on Holmes: in this respect, the scene proves Holmes right when he says, at the end of *The Sign of the Four*, that for him emotion is the enemy of reason; here, he is clearly unable to think straight.

This idea of several discourses superimposed upon one item goes beyond the mere Dickensian echo, even though the space of the Thames may bring it up, as we have seen, and brings to mind a more post-modern approach to fiction. The use of the river as a crime scene is itself not entirely innocent: as neo-Victorian critics Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulman have shown in *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Possessing the Past*, the river Thames is a space that has fascinated neo-Victorian writers for a long time. Arias and Pulman explain this fascination with the hypothesis that the river is a link to the past, both metaphorically (the flow of the water standing for the flow of time), but also quite literally, as the ebb and flow of the river wash up what was supposed to be concealed or forgotten, in new forms that have to be identified and interpreted in order to be understood. In that case, Ross's body was washed out, but at the same time, in the wider context of the novel, it was the repressed sexuality and violence of the Victorian society, embodied by the House of Silk, that the river contributed to bringing to light. This dimension of the Victorian society is very much present in neo-Victorianism, and it is here, perhaps, that *The House of Silk* truly becomes part of this movement, as it challenges the established discourses and representations of the Victorians (like Watson, Mrs Hudson or even Holmes) by confronting them to a reality they refused to acknowledge.

2] When Horowitz challenges ACD: a new sleuth for the 21st century?

a) Everything wrong with the Victorian era from a contemporary perspective:

Steven Marcus, in *The Other Victorians* offers an analysis of Dickens's works that seem to be easily applicable to Horowitz's child-characters in *The House of Silk*. In fact, one could almost go so far as to say that Horowitz writes a Sherlock Holmes adaptation from a Dickensian perspective; outside of the two direct references that we have been able to spot (the comparison between Holmes and Fagin, and the allusion to *Our Mutual Friend*), there is no explicit reference to Dickens, but the preoccupations at the heart of the investigation, and the way Horowitz has of analysing the prejudices of the middle-class, are topics that, according to Marcus, Dickens has explored throughout his books. In *The House of Silk*, as we

have seen, the holmesian canon and characters are used at times as a pretext for a social commentary on the fates of children in London. In Dickens, there is usually one child-character who is faced with a seemingly unlimited number of injustices and misfortunes (and it is usually the protagonist); here in Horowitz, there are two: Ross (obviously) but also his sister Sally, that enters the narrative shortly before Ross's death.

Very little is known about the lives of the two children before Ross becomes part of the Baker Street Irregulars, and the only information the reader has is given by Wiggins to Holmes:

“e never 'ad no parents. They were dead, long ago. 'e never said where 'e come from and I never asked.
[...]
He was looked after, for a while anyway. There was a charity that took 'im in. Chorley Grange, up 'amworth way. It's a school for boys. 'e told me once 'e'd been there but 'e 'ated it and ran away.” 78/79

As we can see, Ross is perfectly qualified to be a Dickensian hero: an orphan who arrived in the city (with his sister, as Holmes becomes aware of later on) and found his way into a charity from which he later ran away. When Holmes and Watson eventually visit Chorley Grange, the adults that work there seem to be Dickensian types as well: the short, round and apparently benevolent headmaster with his gaunt, dry, distrusting wife, the strange young professor of classics with a “twisted face” (86)... By the end of the novel however, Chorley Grange is revealed to be nothing less than the headquarters of the House of Silk, giving the reader a better understanding of why Ross ran away: like all the other boys, he was being sexually exploited by the rich clients of the secret society. In other words, even the charity that should have represented hope for even a slight rise in social status, bringing up poor children by giving them food, shelter and some education, is in fact yet another institution that denies them any sort of freedom by putting the boys at the bottom of a well-established hierarchy. More generally speaking, throughout the whole novel both Ross and Sally are doubly bound to submit to Others –these others being benevolent (like Holmes and Watson) or not (the clients, the House)– because they belong to the lower classes on the one hand, and because they are children on the other hand. As we have said, this objectification makes itself felt in the description of Ross's corpse: the white ribbon marks the child's body as property of someone else, someone richer and more powerful than he ever would have been.

Confronted to this grim prospect of never being free, the two siblings react differently from one another. Sally accepts her condition as an object, living in miserable rooms on the other side of a junkyard, without any hope for a better life. She even refuses to complain or to

talk about what is being done to her brother, in fact, she hardly talks at all: when Holmes and Watson arrive at the inn where she is working and start asking questions about Ross, she refuses to answer and flees. On the contrary, Ross himself tries to escape from his miserable condition by turning to a life of crime; again, all the members of the BSI are implied to have lesser criminal activities when they do not work for Holmes, but Ross is the only one who is described explicitly as a criminal, first through Watson's prejudiced glance (p.52, already quoted) and then when we learn that Ross is an actual pickpocket. Ross's tragedy in the whole novel is precisely not being able to accept his condition: he strives for something more, something that would free him of the control of others. Consequently, he is always alone: he does not really belong with the Irregulars, as we can infer from Watson's first description which sets him apart from the other boys (because he clearly looks more educated and better dressed than the others) who, in turn, do not especially like him (that much we can gather from Wiggins himself); he does not belong in Chorley Grange either, having run away from it; tragically enough, he does not even belong with his sister (though they have been living together), as the narrativer never presents them together. It may be possible to find an echo of Holmes himself in the character of Ross, and it may be why the detective is affected so much by the child's death: both are outsiders that do not really belong anywhere, both are estranged from their social peers and families (to an extent), and Holmes does acknowledge that Ross has "the makings of a detective" (53); in the course of the events, both are sentenced to death by the House of Silk. However, Holmes has three important advantages: he is the hero, but more importantly he is an adult and a member of the (upper?) middle-class, whereas Ross is a poor child.

The social and sexual oppression enforced upon Ross and his sister by the class system is not something that can be escaped alone. If Horowitz pays a tribute to Dickens in the way he focuses on the two children, he does not, however, follow Dickens' optimism in the betterment of their fates. In Dickens, the children eventually find someone who cares for them enough to help them out of their situation (usually through the gift of some money, or through adoption); when that happens, they instantly recognize that person as being a benefactor and accept their help, placing their trust in an adult again. The children in *The House of Silk* do no such thing, because they are all too aware of the harshness of life, and they have seen too much wickedness to ever be able to fully trust anyone any more. The dreadful events both Ross and Sally have experienced have made them emotionally dead: the only character they care about or trust is the other, they see the whole world as a threat and are completely unable to make the difference between a friend and an enemy, as they think that all adults are bent on

exploiting them (sexually or not) to get what they want. Again, we must not forget that they are right in thinking this (early in the narrative at least), since Holmes admits himself, after Ross's death, that the Irregulars were nothing to him, and that he merely used them, even though he meant no harm; moreover, Holmes proves to be the (indirect) cause for the deaths of both children. A good example of this wariness is the scene in which Holmes and Watson, looking for Ross, meet Sally at the inn:

“When she looked up, her face showed only suspicion and contempt. [...] We stood in front of her, but she continued with her work, ignoring us both. 'Miss Dixon?' Holmes asked. The brushes of the broom swept back and forth, the rhythm unbroken. 'Sally?' She stopped and slowly raised her head, examining us. 'Yes?' I saw that her hands had closed around the broom handle, clutching it as if it were a weapon. 'We don't wish to alarm you,' Holmes said. 'We mean you no harm.' 'What do you want?' Her eyes were fierce. Neither of us was standing close to her. We would not dare to. [...] 'Are you from the House of Silk? Ross is not here. He has never been here – and you will not find him.' 'We want to help him.' 'Of course you would say that. Well, I'm telling you, he's not here. You can both go away! You make me sick. Go back where you came from.' [...] For a moment, the girl stood in front of me, not a child at all but snarling like an animal, her eyes ablaze, her lips drawn back in a ferocious grimace.”
92/93

Sally's exchange with Holmes and Watson illustrates perfectly her inability to trust anyone who is either an adult or a member of a higher social class (this is epitomized in her answer “Of course you would say that”). We must also note that, by the end of the dialogue, the character has reverted to a quasi-feral state (she actually wounds Watson before running away) because she feels that she and her brother are in danger. As it is made explicit here, these two children are not living, merely surviving -however, this inability to trust anyone but one another eventually causes their demise, as they are faced with odds greater than they can overcome.

This, precisely, is the tragedy of the two characters, especially Ross's: even though he strives for an escape from his condition, he is doomed to fail because he has internalized the class system and has become the object the House of Silk was trying to turn him into. Unable to feel any emotion other than fear, driven entirely by survival instinct that makes him distrust any kind of authority figure (whether it be Holmes, the police, the teachers), he can no longer pretend to the status of subject or even of human being, for that matter; he has been crushed

by an oppressive system that ascertained its hold on him socially, sexually, economically and even morally, as the system succeeded in turning Ross into a recognisable criminal -again, we must remember that he is immediately identified as such by Watson the first time they meet. The situation is, of course, exactly similar for Sally; one could argue that she is even more objectified as she is used by the House of Silk to frame Holmes even though she did not actually pose any threat to the organization (unlike Ross himself who, after all, tried to blackmail them). That both characters eventually die should not, therefore, come as a surprise; but the death of the two characters must also make us nuance our terminology: Horowitz's perspective on the canon is neo-Dickensian rather than Dickensian, as he departs from Dickens's optimism by presenting children that are all beyond saving, and that can only be avenged. As we will see in a few pages, this revenge will prove problematic when Holmes enacts it in the last pages of the book; for now, we must stop analyse into more details the sexual dimension of the book, in neo-Victorian terms. Indeed, as Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn have analysed in their book *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009*, there is a sub-genre in neo-Victorianism that is called "sexsation" in which contemporary authors focus on the repressed sexuality of the Victorians, bordering on erotic literature. As sexuality is a key topic in *The House of Silk*, and that there is always a need for a more clarified terminology, we must therefore determine whether or not Horowitz's take on the canon can be considered a sexsation.

b) The questions of sexsation and scopophilia

The term "sexsation" was apparently created by Marie-Luise Kohlke in an article entitled "The Neo-Victorian Sexsation: Literary Excursions into the Nineteenth Century Erotic", published in *Probing the Problematics: Sex and Sexuality*. In her first part, she defines sexsation like this:

"neo-Victorian novelists' obsession with 'exhibiting' the underside of nineteenth century propriety and morality, a sensational world of desire and novelty, where any sexual fantasy might be gratified" (1)

The first remark we can make is that neo-Victorian crime fiction seems to be particularly qualified for sexsation, as its plots always revolve around the notion of secret, and is essentially based on a sequence of revelations: the identity of the victim, the reason behind the crime (which, quite often, is yet another secret) and, ultimately, the identity of the killer. Furthermore, if we are to follow the analysis of literary critics, there is often a second layer of interpretation in crime novels that is linked to unconscious or repressed fantasies of Eros/Thanatos (even in the apparently sexless Sherlock Holmes, as Nathalie Jaëck has shown

it).

Later on, Marie-Luise Kohlke adds:

“our fascination with the Victorian erotic unknown seems to derive largely from depictions of such anomalous practices as child prostitution and sexual slavery or of the paradox of wilfully maintained sexual ignorance and unchecked libertinism. In one sense, we extract politically incorrect pleasure from what has become inadmissible or ethically *unimaginable* as a focus of desire in our own time.

[...]

By projecting illicit and unmentionable desires onto the past, we conveniently reassert our own supposedly enlightened stance towards sexuality and social progress.” (2)

There's the rub: as much as *The House of Silk* seems to qualify as a neo-Victorian sexsation in regards to its central topic of the exploitation of children, and the final revelation of the eponymous organisation being a ring of child prostitution, there is nothing pornographic or even erotic in Horowitz's writing, no sexual tension: nothing is seen or described, only alluded to in an abstract way in Watson's narrative. Even when it finally dawns on him what the House of Silk is really about, he describes their activity with righteous indignation but also with every customary linguistic precautions he can take:

“That was the secret of the House of Silk. It was a house of ill-repute, nothing more, nothing less; but one designed for men with a gross perversion and the wealth to indulge it. These men had a predilection for young boys and their wretched victims had been drawn from the same schoolchildren I had seen at Chorley Grange, plucked off the London streets with no family or friends to care for them, no money and no food, for the most part ignored by a society to which they were little more than an inconvenience. They had been forced or bribed into a life of squalor, threatened with torture and death if they did not comply.” 256

Even Holmes himself, when confronting Edmund Carstairs in front of his wife with the knowledge that the art dealer was a client of the House of Silk and that he is the one who sentenced Ross to death when the boy recognized him, refuses to speak out the accusation and to reveal the exact nature of the transactions taking place in Chorley Grange.⁸⁰ This is perhaps the best proof that Horowitz's novel is, first and foremost, a pastiche: a more explicit sexsation would have forced the author to give up the stylistic imitation of Conan Doyle's very Victorian narration, trading understatements and implicitness for a rougher, more detailed and more explicit modern narration; he chose the pastiche, thus giving all the more strength to his depiction of Watson's reactions (even the unconscious ones we have been able to trace) through his narration. Here again, Horowitz's perspective may remind us of

⁸⁰ “What is the House of Silk?’ Catherine Carstairs asked.
‘I will not answer your question, Miss Carstairs.’” 286

Dickens's, in which almost any mention of sexuality was suppressed; however, if we follow Steven Marcus's analysis of the motivations behind this suppression in Dickens's work, we come to realise that they are completely different from Horowitz's:

“The first thing we learn, then, from [Victorian erotic fiction] [...], is what did *not* get into the Victorian novel, what was by common consent or convention left out or suppressed. But this suppression does not merely have a distorting or negative effect; in Dickens's imaginative abstraction from and reconstruction of such an establishment, certain positive values, already inherent in it, are brought into view and focused upon. As one reads through the thousands of pages of [Victorian erotic fiction] [...], one achieves a renewed sense of how immensely humane a project the Victorian novel was, how it broadened out the circle of humanity, and how it represented the effort of Victorian England at its best.” *The Other Victorians* 104/105

Steven Marcus's perspective on the positive nature of self-censorship among Victorian authors is clearly not shared by Horowitz, who rather sees the Victorian attitude as a mixture of hypocrisy, disinterest and self-deception. Consequently, when faced with the truth he has been carefully avoiding, Watson cannot repress it any further or replace it with positive feelings (like Dickens would do), he has to report it; however, he cannot fully do so (as can be inferred from his euphemisms and understatements), because he remains, at heart, a product of the Victorian ideology. Even Holmes, who is far from being the ideal Victorian gentleman as we have seen, cannot shake off the decorum inherent to the Victorian language, and refuses -or is he at a loss?- to describe what the House of Silk was.

It would be wrong, however, to state that Horowitz's book was by no means influenced by Victorian and neo-Victorian erotic literatures. Indeed, clichés and *topoi* of these genres can be found in one key scene of the novel, when Holmes and Watson go undercover in the House of Silk towards the end of the novel, mostly in the description of the settings:

“We were admitted into a hallway that took me quite by surprise, for I had been remembering the austere and gloomy nature of the school on the other side of the lane and had been expecting more of the sort. Nothing would have been further from the truth, for I was surrounded by opulence, by warmth and bright light. A black and white tiled corridor, in the Dutch style, led into the distance, punctuated by elegant mahogany tables with curlicules and turned legs resting against the walls between the various doors. The gas lamps were themselves installed in highly ornate fitments and had been turned up to allow the light to pour onto the many treasures that the house possessed. Elaborate roccoco mirrors with brilliant silver frames hung on the walls, which were themselves draped with heavily embossed scarlet and gold wallpaper. Two marble statues from ancient Rome stood opposite each other in niches and, although they might have seemed unremarkable in a museum, they seemed shockingly inappropriate in a private home.

[...]

The servant led us through a door and into a drawing room as well appointed as the corridor outside. It was thickly carpeted. A sofa and two armchairs, all

upholstered in dark mauve, had been arranged around a fireplace where several logs were blazing. The windows were covered by thick velvet curtains with heavy pelmets, which we had seen from outside, but there was a glass door where the curtain had been drawn back and which led into a conservatory filled with ferns and orange trees with a large brass cage containing a green parakeet at the very centre. One side of the room was taken up with bookshelves, the other with a long sideboard on which were displayed all manners of ornaments, from blue and white Delft pottery and photographs in frames, to a tableau of two stuffed kittens sitting on miniature chairs, their paws pressed together as if they were husband and wife. An occasional table with spandrels stood beside the fire with a number of bottles and glasses.” 254/255

In this extract, Horowitz manages to blend the clichés of Victorian eroticism with those of Orientalism, which in itself is something to be noted; indeed, as Marie-Luise Kohlke demonstrates in her article, the Victorian era is what has replaced the Orient as the space and time in which all sexual fantasies can take place for contemporary writers. If Horowitz uses all these clichés however, it is in order to build up dramatic tension -rather than a sexual one. The opulence of the setting is not only striking, it is, as Watson puts it, “inappropriate”; gradually, through the description, it dawns on the reader that something is not right and that all this decorum must have a sinister purpose. Ultimately, when both Watson and the reader become aware of the nature of the place, almost every detail can be interpreted as a sexual reference: the Roman statues, probably depicting naked young men; the many books in the room, probably pornography or at least erotic literature (both were produced in large numbers during the Victorian era, as we can learn from Marcus); the photographs, which Watson does not describe... Completed with the reference to alcohol, the whole building appears as it is meant to be: an outlet for the perversions of the good society. As much as the barely hidden sexual nature of most of the objects, it is the proximity between poverty and opulence that takes Watson aback and makes him uneasy, as he remembers the “austere and gloomy nature of the school”. Even for the reader, there is something both fascinating and disgusting in this display of apparently unlimited wealth so close to a school that takes in poor children; this is, again, in-keeping with the kind of social commentary Horowitz makes about the Victorian society, either implicitly or explicitly through Watson's narration.

This fascination, this attention given to every little detail while refusing to reveal too much at the same time is particularly striking in Watson's narration in *The House of Silk*. Of course, one might say that the very genre of the adventures of Sherlock Holmes makes it mandatory for the narrator to record the details of the environment, since this is how the detective himself works; however, never in the canon can one find the description of a corpse

as vivid as that of Ross's, nor so many details about the furniture of a building as we have here. One may wonder, therefore, if Horowitz has not traded sexsation for scopophilia. The term was coined by Freud, but was later developed by Lacan in relation to Sartre's theory of the gaze, and it refers to the pleasure one feels when one observes; it is also linked to the way one perceives and understands the Other. Watson is a very interesting case, since his perspective as the only focus and narrator is what Sartre would call an "objectifying gaze" ("regard objectivant"): the reader's representation of the other characters and spaces depends entirely upon Watson's descriptions and reactions, as no other voice comes into the narrative to contradict his version of the events -something which is not the case, as we have seen, in *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story* for example. This all-encompassing, objectifying gaze that Watson is directing at the world reminds us of Victorian ideals like scientific objectivity, positivism, or theories like Bentham's "Panopticon": thanks to science and rationality, everything and everyone could be explained and reduced to a few predictable traits. This is more or less the basis for Holmes's science of deduction, but whereas it was seen as a utopia in the canon, it is debunked by Horowitz in *The House of Silk*. Why? Because Horowitz is a 21st-century who has is aware of the resurgence of repressed voices in literature (whether they be in post-colonialism, feminism, etc.) and who, therefore, fully understands how problematic an objectifying gaze can be. This is why Watson gradually overcomes not only his fascination for Ross's dead body or for the lavish interior of the House of Silk but also his own prejudices, and is even able to understand that his own gaze is just as objectifying and enslaving as the abuses the members of the House of Silk commit against the children, and to reject it (albeit momentarily).

c) Holmes versus Watson: two contrary visions of social justice

At the end of the day, however, there is a difference between the way each hero reacts to the whole case and its consequences. Two scenes need to be put in contrast here, separated from each other by a few chapters: the first occurs when Holmes and Watson are undercover in the House of Silk, right after Watson has understood what the conspiracy was really about; the other is set after the end of the investigation, and is recounted in the epilogue.

"A door opened further down the corridor and a man stepped out, fully dressed but with his clothes in disarray, his shirt hanging out at the back. This time I knew him at once. It was Inspector Harriman. He saw us. 'You!' he exclaimed. He stood, facing us. Without a second thought, I took out my revolver and fired the single shot that would bring Lestrade and his men rushing to our aid. But I did not fire into the air as I could have done. I aimed at Harriman and pulled the trigger with a murderous intent which I had never felt before and have never felt since. For the only time in my life, I knew exactly what it

meant to wish to kill a man.

My bullet missed. At the last second, Holmes must have seen what I intended and cried out, his hand leaping towards my gun. It was enough to spoil my aim.” 257⁸¹

“it was only as we were returning home that I saw in the newspaper a report of the great fire on Hamworth Hill. A building that had once been occupied by a charitable school had been razed to the ground, and apparently the flames had leapt so high into the night sky that they had been visible as far afield as Wembley. I said nothing about it to Holmes and asked no questions. Nor had I remarked that morning that his coat, which had been hanging in its usual place, had carried about it the strong smell of cinders. That evening, Holmes played his Stradivarius for the first time in a while. I listened with pleasure to the soaring tune as we sat together on either side of the hearth.”293/294

Whereas one could think that the two friends would react the same way to the events they are faced with, the two extracts clearly prove otherwise. Watson's reaction is one of righteous indignation and understandable anger but, interestingly enough, it is also an outburst he cannot fully account for nor come to terms with; this much can be inferred from the cold and systematic way in which he describes the whole series of events, as if they were played in slow-motion, and from his lack of reaction when Holmes prevents him from killing Harriman (he simply states “It was enough to spoil my aim”, *i.e.* a description without any emotion, be it relief or anger). For the sake of the analysis, we must ask ourselves why, when he writes about the events after all these years, he still seems unable (or unwilling?) to explain his action. The answer is remarkably simple: again, Watson is too deeply Victorian and middle-class to accept that he has dared, for a moment, substitute his own moral judgement to the system he is usually defending -a system in which Harriman, the man he intended to shoot, is a figure of authority. If Watson's shock is strong enough to make him forget momentarily his system of beliefs, it does not shake him to his core: in much the same way as his regular laments about the terrible living conditions of the poor children, it is soon processed by his Victorian mind and forgotten (or at least repressed).

With Holmes, the situation is quite different; after all, he has a history of putting his own moral values higher than those of the society he nonetheless defends;⁸² in the last chapter

⁸¹ Inspector Harriman is the main antagonist in the novel, even before he is revealed as a member of that secret society; it is he who does everything in his power to send Holmes to jail, and who, later on, is sent by the House of Silk to make sure the detective has been murdered in his cell (which, obviously, did not happen; by that point, Holmes has already escaped custody).

⁸² In this, as much as in the superhuman feats he accomplishes, he is the ancestor of the modern superhero, as critics like Umberto Eco have shown.

of the novel, when Holmes accuses Edmund Carstairs of sending Ross to his death, Watson describes his friend as “a judge about to deliver a sentence, an executioner opening the trapdoor” (285). One may argue that the second extract we have here shows us the extent of the discrepancy between what both friends believe: through Watson's silence and refusal to ascertain that Holmes was behind the fire, one could understand that he does not approve of his friend's act, and that even though he understands why his friend did it he does not feel the same way. Furthermore, the very end of the extract show how content Watson is that everything is back to normal, as if nothing had ever happened: his world view is no longer disturbed or threatened by the contact with the darker side of the Victorian era, and all can be forgotten as a bad dream (as we have said earlier, this is a perfect illustration of how deeply rooted the Victorian middle-class ideology is in the character of Watson). Things are more complicated for Holmes, as he apparently needed some sort of revenge in order to find peace and to be able to go on -which was not the case for Watson, despite his initial murderous impulse in front of Harriman. Horowitz's pessimism is stronger than anything else however, as Holmes's revenge is shown more as an expression of powerlessness than anything else; indeed, just before the epilogue, Holmes and Watson go to visit the ringleader of the House of Silk, who tells them this:

“The gentlemen you have found here tonight were but a small selection of my grateful clients. We have ministers and judges, lawyers and lords. [...] You take my point, Mr Holmes? They will never allow you to bring the matter to light. Six months from now my wife and I will be free and, quietly, we will begin again. Perhaps it will be necessary to look to the continent. I have always had a certain penchant for the south of France. But wherever and whenever, the House of Silk will re-emerge. You have my word on it.”
268/269

Faced with this horrible perspective and with the idea that all his efforts amounted to nought, Holmes found an outlet for his anger and sense of justice by burning the building that stood as a reminder of the whole case and, symbolically, of everything that was wrong with the Victorian system. Watson did exactly the reverse: by putting the case down on paper, and consequently revealing the name of the criminal and the exact circumstances of the crime, Watson put everything and everyone back in their right place within the system; but as he tells the reader in the introduction, he accepted a compromise and delayed the publication of the account by a number of years sufficient to ensure that the people who would be primarily concerned with the narrative be either dead or forgotten. This compromise is, ultimately, the irreconcilable difference between Holmes and Watson, because they are not pursuing the same goal, though they are on a similar quest: Holmes yearns for absolute truth, Watson yearns for

safety and order. As it is made clear in *The House of Silk*, Horowitz is more on the side of Holmes than Conan Doyle ever was (he basically said in his memoirs that he essentially modelled Watson after himself). Let us see, now, how far Horowitz opposes his predecessor and how he uses the narrative (and, especially, the character of Holmes) to make a meta-literary comment on his own relationship to literary predecessors.

3] The “Holmes effect”: how can we process the Victorian legacy?

a) Victorian fiction: an example to follow or to surpass?

In their introduction to *Neo-Victorianism: the Victorians in the Twenty-First Century 1999-2009*, Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn quote a remark made by the well-known contemporary writer Zadie Smith in an article on George Eliot's *Middlemarch*; after praising the novel, she discusses its lasting influence by stating this:

“That 19th-century English novels continue to be written today with troubling frequency is a tribute to the strength of Eliot's example and to the nostalgia we feel for that noble form. Eliot would be proud. But should we be? For where is our fiction, our 21st-century fiction?” (in Heilmann and Llewellyn, p.3)

Smith's claim is clear: we are not done yet with Victorian fiction, and in fact most of what is being written today is still Victorian fiction, despite us no longer being Victorians any longer. When it is put like this, it seems quite absurd; let us see exactly what she means, first, when she speaks of “19th-century English novels”. The definition she gives of that form comes right afterwards: they are novels in which “methods, aims and expression seem so beautifully integrated. Author, characters and reader are all striving in the same direction” (*ibid.*). Unmistakeably, Smith sees the Victorian novel as an example of what every author strives towards, a sort of literary ideal -perhaps because she has been called a Dickensian writer herself by some critics, as Rohan Maitzen points out in her article “Zadie Smith on George Eliot: the 'Secular Laureate of Revelation’”. Interestingly enough, though, Smith is also claiming that 21st-century authors should try to overcome this Victorian heritage and calls for truly contemporary fiction, even though she does not really elaborate on that point. Heilmann and Llewellyn do not entirely follow Smith's analysis, since they believe it is impossible to speak of a united 19th-century English literature; what they do agree on, however, is the danger of rehashing Victorian literary norms without second thought, as it would amount to a confession of creative impotence. As we have already argued in our introduction, they believe the solution to this conundrum is to be found in neo-Victorianism, that is to say a “useful,

subversive, revitalizing” re-reading and re-writing of Victorian texts (p.4) that at the same time takes into account the evolutions that have taken place in society, literature and morals, i.e. what Heilmann and Llewellyn call our sense of “belatedness” (*ibid.*). How does Horowitz fit into all that? Well, one could interpret the whole of *The House of Silk* as an expression, precisely, of the difficulty to challenge the Victorian legacy and to create 21st-century fiction. Unsurprisingly, the character around whom this interpretation revolves is Holmes, but not Holmes in himself as a Subject; rather, Holmes as the focus of the gazes of other characters, and what preconceived ideas they project onto him. To be more specific, we are going to focus, in this sub-sub-part, on what we have dubbed “the Holmes effect”, for lack of better formulation, a phenomenon that is already present in the canon but which is used here by Horowitz for a quite different purpose altogether.

b) The Holmes effect in the canon:

We could define the Holmes effect, quite simply, as the idea that around Holmes, every other character automatically and irremediably seems to be stupid. It is, of course, a trick played on the reader's perception by the narration, because it is in fact the reverse that is true (Holmes is exceptionally clever, whereas everyone else is normal). Holmes himself is both passive and active in the process: passive because he cannot help but be more clever than everyone; active because, as we know, he constantly undermines the efforts made by other characters to challenge him, especially the police -he may do so seriously or jokingly, the result is the same. Interestingly enough, it is only explicitly identified once in the canon, and by Holmes himself -not Watson- at the beginning of the first of the two stories he narrates himself, *The Blanched Soldier*:

“Speaking of my old friend and biographer, I would take this opportunity to remark that if I burden myself with a companion in my various little inquiries it is not out of sentiment or caprice, but it is that Watson has some remarkable characteristics of his own, to which in his own modesty he has given small attention amid his exaggerated estimates of my own performances.” 926

Here, although Holmes himself seems to dismiss Watson's depiction of his powers as mere exaggeration, the very words he uses betray the truth of the matter: the other characters, to Holmes, are hardly more than “burden[s]”, that may have “some remarkable characteristics” (but none that can match Holmes's); Holmes's awareness that he is above the crowd is even perceptible in the off-hand way in which he talks about the matters of life and death he is investigating, as he sees them as nothing more than “little inquiries”. Consequently, even as he is trying to dismiss them, Holmes in fact confirms Watson's claims

and the reality of the “Holmes effect”); at the same time, he means to acknowledge Watson's powers as a fiction writer to transform reality by turning Holmes into a hero he does not think he is, an argument he often uses when they discuss how Watson should write the stories. In other words, there is already something meta-literary here, with two clashing perceptions of Holmes's heroism.

c) The Holmes effect in *The House of Silk*:

In *The House of Silk*, the Holmes effect is explicitly mentioned quite early in the novel (at the beginning of chapter five) by Watson himself, in circumstances that must be quite significant: before introducing the character of Lestrade into the narrative, he discusses the relationship between Holmes and him. Horowitz uses this particular context to introduce a nuance in the traditional opposition between the two detectives that one can find in the canon (in which Lestrade, as we have said, is portrayed as a relatively unpleasant and “shockingly [conventional]” man)⁸³:

“Where I perhaps did Lestrade an injustice was in suggesting that he had no intelligence or investigative skill whatsoever. It's fair to say that Sherlock Holmes occasionally spoke ill of him, but then Holmes was so unique, so intellectually gifted that there was nobody in London who could compete with him and he was equally disparaging about almost every police officer he encountered, apart perhaps from Stanley Hopkins, and his faith, even in that young detective, was often sorely tested. Put it simply, next to Holmes, any detective would have found it nigh on impossible to make his mark and even I, who was at his side more often than anyone, sometimes had to remind myself that I was not a complete idiot. But Lestrade was in many ways a capable man. [...] Lestrade suggested to me, during our long and pleasant conversation, that he may well have been intimidated when he was in the presence of Sherlock Holmes, and that this might have caused him to function less than effectively. Well, he is gone now and won't mind, I am sure, if I break his confidence and give him credit where it's due.” 65

The element of re-writing is obviously very present here and, as in the rest of the book, it is linked mostly to the character of Lestrade, whom Horowitz chose to present as a capable, sympathetic man on whom Holmes could rely (as we have already discussed). Now one must understand that in a book like *The House of Silk*, which was intended to be the first official sequel to the canon, supervised by Conan Doyle Estate, Ltd. and marketed as “The new Sherlock Holmes novel”, any slight change to the tradition established by Conan Doyle has a momentous significance and must be interpreted; even more so if it concerns a character as

⁸³ The quote is from *A Study in Scarlet*, and it is how Holmes first describes Lestrade to Watson (p.19).

famous as Lestrade -who, for most fans, is the face of Scotland Yard in the Holmes canon (even though Conan Doyle created a lot of other police officers who appear as often as Lestrade). What did Horowitz have in mind when he made this retcon? In relation to Zadie Smith's statement about the Victorian novel, we cannot help but see Watson's comments are a meta-literary statement on Horowitz's part, concerning a contemporary writer's struggle to come to terms with an established tradition -a struggle that Horowitz probably experienced several times, as he is used to writing adaptations and pastiches.⁸⁴ One could argue, indeed, that Watson's remark that around Holmes everyone looked like a fool or was intimidated by the detective's genius is what Horowitz himself feels when taking on the legacy of the Victorian giants that were Conan Doyle and Dickens, people that (arguably) have brought the art of fiction writing to an unprecedented level through constant narrative creation and experimentation. By re-establishing Lestrade as a good detective and an intelligent character, despite what Holmes or Watson might have said about him, Horowitz performs an act of positive revisionism and intends to find a way out of the constant comparison with the past. Furthermore, by challenging Holmes (and Watson) like never before throughout the narrative, emotionally, morally, and even physically, he pushes the two characters to their limits and creates space for a productive criticism of the Victorian ideology and literature that we have been able to investigate. In this respect, the fact that the whole plot revolves around a conspiracy theory and Holmes's struggle to shed light on the matter is also relevant, as it parallels the neo-Victorian author's attempts to challenge the official Victorian ideology and bring out the unheard voices of the past in a process similar to what has been done in post-colonialism or feminism -here, mostly, the voices of poor children.

The deaths of most of the major protagonists by the end of the novel (Holmes, Lestrade) and the prospect of Watson's own death (the ending is ambiguous, with Watson having a memory/hallucination of Holmes playing the violin "for [him]" 294) would, then, indicate the possibility of a liberation from the Victorian legacy, or perhaps the need to do so in order not to be locked into a vicious circle of re-living the past, denying 21st-century authors any real creative potency?

If Horowitz does challenge Conan Doyle as we have seen, it was clearly not his chief

⁸⁴ In addition to *The House of Silk*, he wrote several other adaptations, like *The Falcon's Malteser* (a spoof of Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*), *South by Southeast* (after Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*), *I Know What You Did Last Wednesday* (a parody of Christie's *And then there were none*); he also worked as a scriptwriter for *Agatha Christie's Poirot* and *Midsomer Murders* (an adaptation of Caroline Graham's crime novels). He was also the latest writer who was commissioned by the estate of Ian Fleming to write a Bond novel, *Trigger Mortis*, published in September 2015.

concern when he wrote *The House of Silk*: the sustained appropriation of Dickens' works does indeed contribute to the voicing of a concern that was not present in the original canon (the sexual and social submission of children of the lower classes in the Victorian era), but its main purpose is to participate in a greater narrative strategy that is summed up in the back cover blurb, targeting mostly a young readership and introducing them to the canon by celebrating ACD's role in shaping our modern vision of popular literature rather than holmesian scholars who might find the book lacking in ambition (since it does not really shake the foundations of the canon, explicitly at least). *The House of Silk* is “a first-rate Sherlock Holmes mystery for a modern readership” precisely because Horowitz blended Arthur Conan Doyle's legacy with other elements coming from elsewhere that the modern reader expects to find in a piece of popular fiction set in the Victorian era but written in the 21st century. These elements, that form the modern reader's “horizon of expectations” (to use H. R. Jauss' terminology, in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*), might be clichés of Victorian popular fiction created by the Victorians themselves (as we have seen with the Dickensian echoes) or later additions to the genre of crime writing or popular fiction for a teenager and young adult readership (the references to sexuality, conspiracy theories...). The end of the novel does nonetheless make problematic a contemporary author's relation to the literary past (in the form of tradition), a topic that is also at the heart of Caleb Carr's *The Italian Secretary*, but where it is treated in a very different way, as we are about to see now.

B) *The Italian Secretary*: Neo-Victorianism, ghosts and the weight of a tradition

Caleb Carr is originally a military historian, even though he had also made two incursions into the world of neo-Victorian fiction before he was contacted by the U.S. representatives of Conan Doyle Estate, Ltd. for the collection of short stories *Ghosts of Baker Street*, in which he was supposed to write a piece. As we know from Jon Lellenberg's afterword to *The Italian Secretary*, the idea was to have Holmes battle all sorts of supernatural enemies, taking *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Holmes's "most famous adventure of all", as "excuse and inspiration" (*The Italian Secretary*, 273). Carr's project eventually developed into a novel that is concerned, rather than with supernatural in general, with the ideas of "haunting and spectrality"; its titular character is himself a ghost, the vengeful spirit of David Rizzio, Mary Queen of Scots' secretary and confidant, who was murdered in terrible circumstances in 1566. Choosing to place this character at the heart of the narrative enabled Carr to explore our relationship with the past, mostly through the character of Watson, but also to make the contradictions present within the Victorian ideology emerge, and to explore status of the neo-Victorian writer as a *ghost*-writer.

1] History and memory: breaking the ideological consensus on the past

a) The stories we tell ourselves: memory and self-deception

As early as 1997, Dana Shiller had influenced the main problem that neo-Victorian writers were faced with while writing fiction; in her article "The Redemptive Past in the Neo-Victorian Novel", taking up Fredric Jameson's arguments against the use of history in post-modern novels, she warns against the temptation of nostalgia in history novels. Nostalgia, in Shiller's mind, is the exact contrary of history: the longing for a past that never was, because it is the product of contemporary fantasies copied and pasted, as it were, on a pseudo-historical background. For Jameson (and Shiller), a truly historical novel should be about "the resurrection of the dead of anonymous and silenced generations", in other words a constant struggle against our own preconceived ideas about the past that we inherited from sources that did not take into account its complexity.⁸⁵ This is very much the perspective that feminist or post-colonial writers have adopted, and it has become one of the key principles that separate a work of neo-Victorian fiction from a work of fiction set in the Victorian era. Here, with Caleb Carr's *The Italian Secretary*, the matter is slightly different: contrary to *The House of Silk* (or

⁸⁵ The quote is from Jameson's *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, reproduced in Shiller, 1.

to *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story*, for that matter), the novel does not question the relationship between our time and the Victorian era, but seeks to examine how our relationship to the historic past has evolved (*if it has evolved*) since that time. The characters of *The Italian Secretary* are themselves struggling with a historic past that makes an unexpected and murderous return, and adopt a variety of attitudes and postures to come to terms with it. The central issues of the novel revolve around the notions of history, memory, and perception, all linked to the central figure of the ghost.

Contemporary historians like Maurice Halbwachs or, more recently, Pierre Nora, have struggled to include the notion of memory within the scope of historical analysis; as natural as it may seem that history and memory go hand in hand, it is in fact not the case, as both work in very different ways. Perhaps Charles Péguy sums it best when he argues, in his *Clio, dialogue de l'histoire et de l'âme païenne*, that “memory and history form a right angle. History runs parallel to an event, whereas memory stems from it and revolves around it”; the quote is reproduced in Philippe Joutard's article on “Collective memory” in *Historiographies*, II (p. 780).⁸⁶ In other words, as Joutard argues further, memory is a direct, emotional relationship to the past, with all the dangers that it might bring about (anachronism, negation of the temporal gap between past and present, living or re-living the past...). It is also linked to the notion of forgetfulness, which Joutard separates into two categories: passive, *i.e.* when one forgets an event or a fact because he does not deem it significant; and active or “deliberate”⁸⁷, *i.e.* when one forgets an event or a fact because “it challenges the mental image one has of oneself”.⁸⁸ Of course, these two notions do not only concern events that one has actually experienced; they mostly apply to collective memory and tradition. To bring out forgotten events, characters or facts consequently amounts to challenging the society (the ideology?) that has built, transmitted and validated this organisation of the collective memory. In Carr's novel, a distant and half-forgotten past, in the shape of David Rizzio's ghost, poses a number of increasingly difficult challenges to the collective memory and the Victorian ideology and these challenges prove, in turn, to be increasingly disturbing for most of the characters (especially Watson, Mycroft and Alison Mackenzie). That Carr is interested in memory rather than history, and especially in the idea of the trauma (which is, essentially, the return of a repressed past that cannibalizes the present and is continually re-lived) is clear right from the start, as Watson experiences an apparently unexplainable emotional shock

⁸⁶ The quote is originally in French, we have tried our best to translate it without losing too much of its meaning; it runs “la mémoire et l'histoire forment un angle droit. L'histoire est parallèle à l'événement, la mémoire lui est centrale et axiale.”

⁸⁷ “volontaire” in French (*ibid.*, 783)

⁸⁸ “il brouille l'image que l'on se fait de soi” in French (*ibid.*)

when Holmes describes the circumstances which prompted Mycroft to send a wire asking them to come to his aid:

“The bodies of two men in the Queen's employ – scheduled to have been involved in reconstruction the oldest portion of the structure, those rooms that were once the private realm of the Scottish Queen – are found dead as a result of an untold number of terrible wounds, before they could even begin their work. Do not the circumstances, the awful coincidences, call something and someone to mind?”

I was about to protest continued ignorance; and then the beginnings of an old, a very old story began to draw in from the furthest corners of my memory, bringing a shudder with them.

'Yes, Watson,' Holmes said quietly, joining me at the window. 'The Italian secretary...' He, too, looked out of the window, and spoke the name with a strange fascination: 'Rizzio...'” 26

Holmes himself is not entirely immune to the emotion brought back to the surface by the ghost of Rizzio, as is made clear by his choice of words when presenting the case to Watson (“terrible”, “awful”) and by the “fascination” Watson hears in his voice when he finally utters the name of the Italian secretary. However, unlike Watson, he is able to put that emotion in check precisely because he has identified the memory earlier, and already managed to process it, reducing the hold it has on him, whereas Watson and the reader have only just begun to re-live the past, a process that will culminate, quite literally, in Mary's private chambers, on the scene of the historic crime.

Watson's uneasiness with the disturbing event that was the assassination of David Rizzio manifests itself sporadically at first, but through a number of telltale signs; the first being his reluctance to talk about it or to confront his own partial memories of it to Holmes's more detailed and less biased account. The key scene in which both the reader and Watson himself become aware of this takes place when the two friends are aboard the special train that is bound for Scotland (we will not reproduce the whole scene, unfortunately, as it is too long to feature here; we will focus on Watson's reactions):

“It is a hideous story, Watson. [...] Hideous, but instructive, in at least one sense,' Holmes continued, his voice momentarily disdainful. 'We have been accustomed, during our own era, to treat the Elizabethan as the age of Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Drake – of high literature and higher patriotism. We forget that it had a particularly unseemly side, that it was a time when far more Englishmen were burned at the stake than ever played upon the stage,; when there were more spies trading secrets and cutting throats than there were heroes walking the decks of defiant ships. [...]'

'Come now, Holmes,' I protested, not without a certain sternness. I had always considered my brilliant friend's political and historical opinions to be rather simplistic (I can still recall the fact that, when we first met, he confessed to never having heard of Thomas Carlyle, much less to having read any of his works), but in the main this presented no cause for argument between us: Simple though his interpretations may have been, they were usually in agreement with my own sentiments. But on occasions he could be

what I considered naïvely cynical about such matters – and any man with a military background feels insults to his nation and its history with his heart, whatever his head may think of the actual facts of the case. 'We're talking,' I continued, 'about Scotland, not England.'

'We are talking about a particularly revolting crime which, without the backing of powerful Englishmen – indeed, without the implicit co-operation of that supreme shape-shifter, Elizabeth – would never have been so much as attempted. No, Watson – this is one act of bloodshed that we cannot simply file away under “the sort of things that happen in Scotland” - although its final form has led many supposed English “patriots” to dismiss it.'

However much it might have lacked nuance, his point was essentially correct. Indeed, it forced me to realise (less than comfortably, given my previous, rather scolding tone) that I had forgotten most of the details of the infamous murder of David Rizzio, private secretary, music instructor, and confidant to Mary, Queen of Scots.” 34/35

Watson's initial reaction immediately marks the event of Rizzio's death as problematic, if not traumatising: he refuses Holmes's opinion simply on the grounds that it contradicts the way collective memory in the Victorian era has chosen to remember the era; indeed, he initially refuses to consider the fact that Holmes's interpretation may be right and that the official perspective on the events (a perspective that, obviously, Watson shares, as would “any man with a military background”) may be flawed. Watson's initial dismissal of Holmes's allegations is understandable because, as he reminds the reader, Holmes is known for his general lack of interest for politics and history (the anecdote about Carlyle is, incidentally, a direct reference to the second chapter of *A Study in Scarlet*); nonetheless, it does show a reluctance on Watson's part to question the truth behind the Victorian collective memory of the murder, which is to simply see it as “the sort of things that happen in Scotland” and another proof of the English superiority. Indeed, as we have said and as is made clear by Watson's immediate siding with the official perspective and identification with a community (essentially, every patriotic Englishman), there is a danger in questioning the way a community represents its past that must not be overlooked, because it may end up challenging its present system of beliefs and values (we will later examine what Caleb Carr has to say about the beliefs and values of the Victorian society). As Watson's choice of words indicate, Holmes's answer proves too convincing for him to dismiss it again, and thus he is “forced” to search through his memory, only to realise that it fails him. Faced with the realization that his knowledge of the past is flawed because it is based on a collective memory that, in turn, has been shaped by an ideology, Watson's only option to overcome the trauma is to accept the past as something that may jar with his own present values and beliefs, in other words to see it in his full complexity. In order to do so, he has to re-live it twice: the first time metaphorically under Holmes's guidance, as the detective uses the train journey to recount the events; the first

time quite literally as the heroic duo are apparently faced with the ghost of Rizzio and the pervading presence of the past at Holyrood House. The journey north to Scotland consequently becomes a journey into a problematic past, not only for Watson but for every other character (except Holmes himself, who is, as always, quite undeterred by the whole thing) that ends with the creation of a new consensus; following which event the two heroes can go back to Baker Street and to the present. As we are about to see now, it is in fact not the murder of David Rizzio in itself that proves problematic, but rather the fact that two mutually exclusive discourses are pitted against one another, thus turning the past into an ideological battlefield -a battlefield that quite literally becomes incarnate in the present of the characters, at the climax of the book.

b) How the past can be used: the past as the site of an ideological struggle

Watson's reaction in the preceding extract showed us that he saw any criticism addressed to the Victorian perspective on one past event as a direct attack on the ideology as a whole. The past, especially in Victorian times, and especially the period of time known as the Elizabethan era, was highly politicized: at a time when the British hegemony was starting to be challenged abroad and when the traditional values were starting to be questioned at home, the matter of who and what shaped collective memory and, consequently, identity and self-representation was more pressing than ever. In *The Italian Secretary*, Carr stages this struggle and polarizes it: on one side, we have the official perspective respectful of the Victorian ideology, embodied by characters like Mycroft or Queen Victoria herself; on the other, the villains of the story Will Sadler and Lord Francis Hamilton.

The first glimpse of the official perspective we have in the book is Mycroft's alarming but encoded telegram that first Holmes, then Watson, attempt to decipher. We will come back to its contents in a few pages, but for the moment we would like to focus on the event that prompted Mycroft to send it: the “accidents” that befell two Scots, Dennis McKay and Alistair Sinclair, who were employed directly by the Queen. These accidents were obviously murders, that much the reader guesses right from the start, but what is more interesting perhaps is the mission of the two employees:

“[They] had been given the commission of restoring and even redesigning some of the more ancient and dilapidated sections of Holyroodhouse, the official royal residence in Edinburgh [...]. Her Majesty had refurbished the baroque sections of the palace; but the west tower – the last remaining medieval element and, significantly, the only area to survive the fire [before it was restored by Charles II] – had not yet received the same care, and Sir Alistair Sinclair had been given the job.” 19/20

As Watson states it quite clearly, the job that both Sinclair and McKay were hired to do is essentially linked to the question of memory, as it deals with the way the Queen herself wants the nation to remember its past. The fact that she wants “the last remaining medieval element” of the castle to be “[redesigned]” (even more than restored), indicates how much of a threat she believes Mary's legacy to represent. The medieval tower, home of a catholic queen who allied with the French and whose worst enemy was Elizabeth, is explicitly opposed to the baroque castle, built by a protestant king of Scotland and England who embodied the restoration of the traditional monarchy after Cromwell's death; between the two rulers, the one Victoria chooses as an example (according to the text) is obviously Charles II. The official project that Victoria wanted Sinclair and McKay to carry out was a highly ideological representation of the past that would have got rid of its most disturbing aspects, replacing them with other memories that are easier to accept for the Victorian mind. However, it is precisely this attempt at repressing some of the collective past that triggers a reaction of rejection by Will Sadler and Lord Francis Hamilton, and that this reaction should precisely take the form of a return of the past that the official version is trying to repress (both Sinclair and McKay have been murdered using the same *modus operandi* that was used in the assassination of David Rizzio) should therefore not come as a surprise.

When faced with such a normative and ideologically influenced representation of the past, one could almost sympathize with Will Sadler's and Lord Francis Hamilton's attempts at debunking it. Almost. Indeed, the two villains cultivate an alternative memory of the events, a memory based on the identification of the murder of David Rizzio as a traumatic event and the possibility to re-live it. In other words, they are precursors of what is known today as dark tourism: they secretly supervise tours of the west tower for wealthy clients, thus giving them the chance to be directly confronted to the event. It is precisely by giving the event such relevance that they turn the west tower (and the assassination of David Rizzio) into what Pierre Nora called a “memory space” (“*lieu de mémoire*”); as Nora defined it, the memory space is at once natural and artificial, since Sadler and Hamilton play tricks on their audience to make the tour more worthwhile and memorable, appealing to their superstition and emotion through the “blood that never dries” or the fake ghost of David Rizzio who walks in the tower, as their leaflet indicates:

“The headline of the pamphlet declared:

ALL THE DARK AND SECRET LOCALES OF EDINBURGH,
REVEALED!

The few pages of the thing described many spots where those willing to first

part with an unnamed (but obviously considerable) amount of money and then venture out into the depths of a Scottish night might encounter 'EVIDENCE OF THE WORLD BEYOND!'. And the featured attraction among this roster was clearly a visit to the royal Palace of Holyrood, in particular the scene of 'the most ghastly murder in Scottish history, one so terrible that its victim still visits the spot where he died every night, renewing the pool of blood that he shed there and searching for some unsuspecting Scotsman – or woman! – upon whom he may vent the rage he still feels against the nation that used him so cruelly, and that has, for centuries on end, left him unavenged!’” 142

The leaflet is interesting, especially its description of the murder of Rizzio, as it makes the idea of trauma explicit: the emphasis on a seemingly endless repetition of the ghost's routine, to which there is apparently no escape, shows us as much. The problem is, of course, that Sadler and Hamilton capitalize on this event and encourage the trauma: they do not bring out the repressed voices of the past so that the troublesome memory can be faced in all of its complexity, and then dealt with; rather, they revel in the re-enactment of the event, in a sort of inescapable cycle. This is why they are linked, in the novel, to anarchy and negative subversion: the past, to them, is a means of empowerment and of control of the others. Their aim is ultimately the same as Victoria's, even though their means is different: Sadler and Hamilton both rely more on people's tendency to create myths and superstition out of the (collective or personal) memory of an event, and exploit these myths. Alison McKenzie (among other characters) is convinced of the reality of the ghost; as she tells Holmes shortly before he shows Watson the leaflet: “It is no' a legend, Mr Holmes – I've seen the blood that never dries!”(ibid.); Watson himself is shaken by the two villains' mastery of their craft, and after having read the leaflet, he adds: “I studied the patently nonsensical but (loath though I was to admit it) effective document for several minutes” (ibid.).

Faced with these two normative and mutually exclusive representations of a collective past, Watson and the reader must, as always, place their trust in Sherlock Holmes. From the very beginning of the novel, as we have seen, he embodies a sort of middle ground between the Victorian ideology and the subversive forces unleashed by Sadler and Hamilton: though at first he seems to be very critical or even “disdainful” towards the way the established memory of the event has been constructed (p.34), the re-examination of the past he advocates aims at empowering the people and giving them the possibility to shape their own memories of the past, rather than blindly follow a diktat that is imposed upon them. As always, Holmes is on the side of rationality, of caution, of investigation – an investigation into one's own past or into the collective past. As we are about to see now, his very presence seems to dispel the prejudices and restore everyone to their true selves, making new voices emerge in the

narrative, but in a positive rather than disruptive way.

c) The emergence of repressed voices within the narrative:

The direct consequences of Holmes's actions are always the revelation of some hidden or repressed truth -indeed, one could argue that this is what *any* crime novel is about. In the canon, this revelation restores the social order that was in place before, as well as the identity and sanity of the client, who had become, for a moment, disturbed by the irruption of a threatening Other into his comfort zone (this is an extremely sketchy summary of Nathalie Jaëck's main argument in *Les aventures de Sherlock Holmes: une affaire d'identité*, a book we have had the occasion to refer to before). In *The Italian Secretary*, things develop differently: by the time the novel reaches its conclusion and thanks to Holmes's efforts, all of the major active characters (be they good or bad) have undergone some sort of self-revelation, which makes it impossible to revert to the previous order of things in which some voices were silenced; consequently, a new, more comprehensive order is created.

The first case in point we want to examine here concerns the palace's butler, Hackett. When he is first introduced into the narrative, he is presented by Watson essentially as a caricature of the Scottish manservant, rude and threatening:

“[Hackett's features] were weathered, rugged, and altogether unsympathetic, while the hair was longer than would have been expected for a man in such a position; the black beard, meanwhile, was kept close-cropped, and did much to augment a rather ominous impression. But the feature that most gave one pause was Hackett's left eye, which was in fact no eye at all, but a glass approximation of the same. This alone might not have been cause for alarm, despite the four very pronounced scars that ran away from the socket [...]; but the eye had apparently been poorly fitted, for when Hackett scowled to excess, the pressure of his descending brow often dislodged the glass sphere [...]. At such moments, the badly mauled flesh and exposed bone of the socket itself were revealed: a truly ghastly sight.

The first time this occurred, Hackett was just bending over to retrieve my rod case, which his son had dropped. [...] On seeing that I alone had witnessed the process, Hackett darkened considerably, and he said, quietly but with the bitterness peculiar to certain strains of Celtic blood:

'Your pardon, sir – I hope the gentleman was no' *repulsed*.'” 104/105

In Watson's impressionable and somewhat prejudiced eyes, Hackett is immediately associated with a sense of uneasiness and dread because of his blatantly anti-Victorian attitude: in a society where appearance is everything, especially for people in a position of power or prestige, Hackett's refusal to embrace the codes (see the second underlined passage) is felt like an act of defiance -and indeed, it is one. To this one must add his passive-aggressive attitude to his guests, which contradicts the essence of what a butler is, and the purely physical disgust Watson feels looking at him, and the character is made “altogether

unsympathetic” before he has even uttered a word. Moreover, the last underlined passage referring to his Celtic nature comes with a double meaning: at face value, it simply means that he is not English, and therefore always already not a true Victorian; but when one remembers that Holmes and Watson have been attacked on the train by someone who appeared to be a Scottish nationalist (who also looked very much like a caricature of Scottish nationalist), one becomes aware that Watson is implicitly linking the two events and listing Hackett among the villains.

This portrait of the butler as a bad man eventually turns out to be entirely wrong, as Hackett is revealed to be a victim of the mistreatments of Sadler and Hamilton, and the scene that we have just studied is revealed to have been an elaborate deception, the result of both Watson's prejudices and Hackett's self-staging; this much becomes clear in the two following extracts:

“As Holmes had predicted, the once off-putting Hackett (who, thankfully, wore a patch over his injured eye during this encounter, forgoing the glass eye that had so puzzled and distressed me earlier) became quite a changed man at the sight of [his niece], and even more when he observed that she was entirely safe” 149/150

“Mrs Hackett, if I may – is it your husband's common practice to wear the patch that we saw upon his eye last night, rather than the rather ill-fitting glass eye that he struggled with so while taking my bags?’
‘Indeed, Doctor.’ A new voice had entered our chorus: Hackett's, and as he entered the room I noted that the man was – as if to demonstrate the current point of the explication – wearing the patch. ‘I do sincerely beg your pardon for that display, sir. It was yet another attempt to signal to you gentlemen, in the hope that you would not take matters in the palace at their surface value.” 187

Thanks to Holmes's actions, the secret life of the palace is brought to light; consequently, there no longer is any need for dissimulation on the part of the characters that were informed before, and they can stop pretending. This movement towards a more natural self-representation is echoed by a change in Watson's own gaze, as his Victorian values and prejudices are challenged -the second extract above is set just after Watson has been informed by Holmes of Hamilton's deception, a revelation he has a hard time accepting precisely because, in his Victorian frame of mind, the aristocrat represents respectability and nobility.⁸⁹

The character that changes the most throughout the narrative, however, is probably Alison Mackenzie, the poor Scottish girl who has been seduced and abandoned by Will Sadler after he has had his way with her. When she enters the narrative, she is nothing more than a

⁸⁹ When Mrs Hackett elaborates on Lord Francis's misdeeds, Watson eventually interrupts her, because he is “unable to bear any more of this litany of foul abuses of power by a royal agent.” 180

disembodied “sound” that cannot even be clearly identified by Watson:

“it seemed to be a woman weeping, sometimes mournfully, occasionally fearfully and even desperately: a sound such as would have chilled the most hardened of souls” 127

As Holmes and Watson draw closer to her, the doctor is able to recognise the sound for what it is really:

“In Heaven's name, Holmes,' I declared. 'Why, this is no ghost, it is some poor creature in distress – perhaps desperately so, from the sound of it!’”
ibid.

That Watson initially mistook Alison Mackenzie for a ghost is telling: in a purely Victorian perspective, she is hardly more. She is a girl, belongs to the lower classes, is Scottish, deeply superstitious and, worst of all, she is pregnant without having a husband – in her words, she is “lost” (131). In fact, she has been submitted to so many mistreatments, and has integrated so much the Victorian moral discourse, that she only wants to die when Holmes and Watson meet her; she is so ashamed of her morally condemnable pregnancy that she initially refuses the two heroes' help, as she believes the only place she now belongs is outside of society, in the dark, mysterious corners of the west tower, even if it means either death or madness for her. The stain of her pregnancy is unwashable for her, and will forever set her apart from society: she defines herself as “a stranger who's alone in a forbidden place” (134) and states several times that there is “no family that will have [her]” (132). The guilt she feels is so strong that it transcends the purely social conventions and takes on an existential meaning (“my everlasting shame and damnation” 137); the ghost then becomes the embodiment of this guilt, an oncoming punishment that she repeatedly evokes in her speech, riddled with pronouns and periphrases that refer to him:

“‘Tis him!’ she whispered desperately.
'Him?' said Holmes, eyeing the panel ceiling. 'Sadler?'
'No!' the girl wept. 'Him!' She glanced at us both, horror in her every feature.
'The poor man they murdered all those years ago! He has ne'er left, can ye no' see?' She looked at the ceiling once more. 'The Italian gentleman – 'tis his spirit, come for revenge...’” 140

From her frantic attitude when she hears what she thinks is the ghost, coming for her, it becomes clear that Will Sadler and Lord Francis Hamilton have managed to exert full control over her, and even though she eventually acknowledges as much, she has a hard time shaking it off because it requires an extreme shift in her perception of herself and of the world. Her struggle to regain control is embodied in the narrative by the necessity for her to get rid (at

least partially) of her superstitions about the towers, a process Holmes himself oversees:

“Crouching again before the girl, Holmes put a final series of questions to her: 'Miss Mackenzie – do you understand that it was not a spirit you heard just now, but a man?' The girl tried to indicate assent, but the movement was no more than anxious quiver of her head. 'And do you believe as much?' 'I – am trying, Mr Holmes. You canna' ask for anything save my best...'” 146

In quite a twist from his perspective in the original canon, Holmes seems here to have a deep understanding of the human psyche; that much is clear from his two questions asked to Miss Mackenzie. Understanding and believing are indeed two utterly different notions, and the novel as a whole seems to constantly ask these two questions to Watson (and the reader). Coming back to Miss Mackenzie, the final image Watson gives of her in the book is reassuring:

“As a result, Robert's only 'punishment' was to be allowed to escort Miss Mackenzie back to the western loch country of her youth, where, we could only suppose, the pair would one day quietly marry, once the remarkable girl had quite recovered from her ordeal – as well as the birth of her child” 251

One must note that, even though Watson does not seem to doubt the possibility of a happy ending for her, her fate is ultimately not revealed and that, if the girl is indeed pictured as being “on her way to a happier state” (252), she is not there yet. The underline passage introduces a slight ambiguity to the reassuring assumption Watson is making about the future of the couple, and reminds the reader, if needed be, that the process of accepting her true self and shaking off the control the villains had over her was painful and difficult for Miss Mackenzie, even with Holmes's (and Watson's) help.

In *The Italian Secretary*, Holmes represents, for once, the emergence of a complex and subversive discourse that contradicts the artificial simplicity of the Victorian ideology: thanks to his action, the masks fall and characters reveal themselves as something entirely different from what they initially appeared. Hackett is a trustworthy man, Miss Mackenzie becomes a “remarkable girl”, Robert Sadler comes out of his evil brother's shadow, and the true nature of the versatile Francis Hamilton is eventually exposed to the eyes of the world; in short, the Victorian preconceived ideas are challenged in all sorts of ways. In this respect, Carr's Holmes is quite different from Conan Doyle's; starting from this comparison, we will now examine the way Carr gradually builds a subversive discourse precisely within the Victorian frame of references that Watson has.

2] The Victorian age: an era of paranoia?

a) A two-faced Holmes: the ambiguities of the Victorian ideology

The Victorian ideology that Holmes stands for in the canon is, as we have argued before, based on the idea of scientific progress and rationality; however, its attitude towards reality is ambiguous, to say the least. Indeed, as Jon Lellenberg argues in his afterword to *The Italian Secretary*, while it is bent on expanding thoroughly the scope of scientific analysis by applying it to all of the natural phenomena that can be observed, it also tends to over-simplify matters, especially when dealing with topics that breach on less observable issues (psychology, memory, emotion...). Holmes himself is particularly averse to psychology, and does not care about why the criminal has done the deed as much as how he did it: “for Holmes, the magnifying glass and the microscope suffice, plus a knowledge of past crime from which to draw patterns applicable to present and future crimes” (272). In other words, Holmes's “science” is both inclusive (because based on the belief that it can explain anything) and exclusive (because anything that cannot be explained through scientific observation and deduction, such as matters of the mind, is dismissed as unimportant or virtually non-existent). In *The Italian Secretary*, it is a very different Holmes Carr presents us with, so different that it shocks even Watson. When, at the beginning of the novel, Watson criticizes Holmes's attitude towards Mrs Hudson's belief that there is a ghost haunting a shop in Baker Street, telling him that “[he] might have shown more respect for her beliefs, [...] different though they are from [his] own” (25), Holmes answers in the following way:

“In a manner different from, but just as strong as, our landlady's, I give entire credence to the power of ghosts. And I must warn you, Watson, that your own views on this subject will likely be tested before this case is over.” (ibid.)

That such a sentence as “I give entire credence to the power of ghosts” would never have been uttered by ACD's Holmes is clear: we may remember the off-handed way in which he dismissed the superstitious theories of supernatural intervention in cases like *The Hound of the Baskervilles* or *The Sussex Vampire*. That Watson (and the reader) should be taken aback, and his own rational beliefs shaken, does therefore not come as a surprise, but it is based on a total misinterpretation, as Holmes explains in more details at the end of the case, when both heroes are back in Baker Street:

“You asked me once, Watson, if I was serious about believing in “ghosts” – the idea perplexed you so greatly, in fact, that you did not consider the actual statement that I had made. [...] My actual words were, “I give entire credence to the *power* of ghosts.” Perhaps you may ask, somewhat fairly, whether any claimed difference between the two is not mere wordplay. But it is not. Within the study of crime, Watson, as within the study of *all* disciplines, phenomena occur that we are powerless to explain. We tell ourselves that some day the human mind *will* explain them; and perhaps it

shall. But for now, the unexplained nature of these phenomena gives them extraordinary force – for they cause the behaviour of individual persons, as well as towns, cities, and nations, to become passionate and irrational. This is power, indeed; and what possesses power, we must admit, possesses reality. Is it real? The question is the wrong one, and irrelevant, really – real or no, it is a *fact*.

[...] We believe; we act accordingly; others tell us that our beliefs are false; yet how can they be, when those beliefs have persuaded us, sometimes many of us, to alter our behaviour? No, Watson – we cannot question the power of that which motivates human action, particularly that which motivates such actions along the lines that we have lately witnessed. Are ghosts – indeed, are *gods* real? We cannot know, but they are powerful facts of human intercourse.” 259/260

The Holmes that is speaking here is even less Victorian than its canonical counterpart, and clearly the expression of a 21st-century awareness: his questioning of the very notion of reality, his attention to language, his deconstruction of the way people act and react are all very post-modern. While we understand eventually that Holmes has always held the same view concerning ghosts throughout the novel, it is Watson's own apprehension of that notion that changes considerably, as Holmes's words plunge him into a “deep sense of philosophical malaise” (31), a true existential angst, when he sees that everything he once thought to be true is challenged. Through Watson, Carr confronts the Victorian ideology to its limits and self-contradictions, showing how easily superstitions and irrational beliefs resurface when science is apparently at a loss to account for something. The doctor's initial bravado and dismissal of the ghost of Rizzio as a fairy tale do not hold very long, once he is taken out of his comfort zone and plunged into the action. One episode in the novel is particularly interesting in this respect; the first time Holmes and Watson hear the ghost, in chapter nine, he is whistling a tune that Holmes immediately identifies:

“One would not expect such an audible step, from such an ethereal being – and the tune!”

‘Yes, what of the tune?’ I asked [...].

‘You did not recognize it?’

‘It was in keeping with the voice, I believe – vaguely Italian – and there were moments when I thought that I might know it. But ultimately, I could not place the thing.’

“‘Vaguely Italian?’” Holmes replied, quite dubiously. ‘Watson, there really are times when I despair for your musical education.’” 145

Unable to take enough distance from what has just occurred, Watson fails to see, in the tune whistled by the ghost, what Holmes has already deduced: a proof that the whole thing is but an elaborate masquerade destined to turn Miss Mackenzie mad. It is only ten pages (and a few hours) later that he finally works it out on his own:

“my friend broke the silence of our progress by rather pointedly and relentlessly whistling [...] the same tune that the mysterious visitor had hummed during his visit to Queen Mary's rooms in the palace. I was on the verge of reminding Holmes of his rather limited ability to carry a tune on anything save a violin, when it occurred to me that I knew the piece in question.

'Good Lord, Holmes!' said I. 'Verdi!'

[...] 'Verdi, indeed, Watson – to be precise, “Va, Pensiero,” from his *Nabucco* [...] – first performed at La Scala, in '42.'

'And our centuries-old ghost apparently knows it?' [...]

'Not only knows it,' replied an amused Holmes, 'but is aware – or has been told – that Miss Mackenzie does *not* know it, and cannot therefore determine that the person humming the tune is many things, but no sixteenth-century wraith.’” 153/154

Indeed, one could argue that it was easy for Will Sadler and Lord Francis Hamilton to devise such a plan to control Miss Mackenzie, as even Watson's reactions -though he is a scientist and an educated man- show well how quickly the mind reverts to non-scientific explanations for things he do not understand. The irrational, the supernatural, are always around the corner -a metaphor all the more relevant as Watson sees, or thinks he sees, the ghost of Baker Street when he is walking in the street at the end of the novel. In this respect, the conclusion of the novel is “a source of [...] doubts rather than [...] reassuring conclusions”, as Watson presents it in his first chapter (pp. 2/3), as it leaves the matter of whether or not there was a ghost in the tower at the end, or merely a hallucination (or another accomplice of Sadler's and Hamilton's). Refusing the recourse to a reassuring and all-explaining rationality moves Carr's pastiche further away from the canon and yet, at the same time, is resonates more with ACD's personal evolution towards the end of his life: as we know, the father of crime fiction had a keen interest in the supernatural, and became gradually convinced of the existence of spirits and ghost, precisely because he felt that science alone could not explain everything in the world.

b) Silencing the Other: insanity and non-conformism

Despite Holmes's attempts at broadening the perspective and Watson's ultimate epiphany, it remains dangerous to challenge the established Victorian views and to give too much credence to non-scientific entities like ghosts; and Watson reminds us of this at the end of his introductory chapter:

“For there are recesses of the mind to which no man allows even his closest fellows access; not, that is, unless he wishes to hazard an involuntary sojourn in Bedlam...” 3

What Watson hints at here is that the Victorian era saw a rise in the debates around the

notions of insanity and non-conformism, which would be even more developed a few years later with the apparition of psychoanalysis. One of the key aspects in which neo-Victorianism has managed to challenge the Victorian legacy concerns precisely those two notions, which were already present in Victorian fiction but in an implicit or indirect way: we may think of the character of Renfield in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, of Miss Havisham in Dickens's *Great Expectations*, of Mrs Rochester in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*... Even in the holmesian canon, madness always lurks in the dark corners, as many secondary characters display signs of erratic behaviour -very often the clients that come to seek Holmes's help. One may recall the opening sentence of *The Beryl Coronet*:

“Holmes,' said I, as I stood one morning in our bow-window looking down the street, 'here is a madman coming along. It seems rather sad that his relatives should allow him to come out alone.' 192

Holmes's answer interestingly confirms Watson's analysis:

“I rather think he is coming to consult me professionally. I think that I recognize the symptoms.” (ibid.)

This exchange between the two heroes is reveals much more about the Victorian perspective on madness than what meets the eye. First, it becomes clear that in the Victorian era madness is now seen as a disease that can be cured: like any disease, its presence can be deduced from a number of “symptoms”, which can be detected simply through observation. This idea is extremely interesting, because it shows us how much the Victorians paid attention to appearances in their conception of the world. Watson sees an agitated man in the street, he immediately labels him a “madman”; Holmes's thought process is very similar, but as we know he goes much deeper in his analysis of the nature of that which is subjected to his scrutiny, as he is able to give a thorough analysis of one's nature (one's essence, as it were) from the details he picks up. There is, behind the *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, the conviction that one's true nature cannot remain hidden from the eyes of the scientist.

What is also interesting is that Holmes himself seem to consider his job as akin to that of a doctor, especially that of an alienist: people “consult” him when they are faced with an event so momentous, so out of the ordinary, that they cannot cope with it on their own. Holmes's investigations, much like today's crime reconstructions, enable the event to be acted out again, but with a more positive outcome: the identification of the criminal and its punishment. This corresponds to what we have said about the trauma.

The third element that one can deduce from this dialogue is the way the Victorians treated madness on an everyday basis. True enough, madness could be cured, and mad people

were beginning to be treated as patients, but Watson's remark implies that they should not be allowed to roam the streets without supervision; indeed, if we follow his line of thoughts, they should not be seen at all in the public space, but rather locked away or constantly supervised by sane people (either doctors or members of the patient's family). Madness was perceived as a disease, and like every disease there was a danger of contamination, therefore calling for measures of confinement. The threat that insanity represents to the established order of things is precisely what both Watson and Mycroft are wary of in *The Italian Secretary*, and several passages in the novel allude to the ways society could defend itself against such a threat. As we have said, the subject is alluded to by Watson as early as in his introduction of the whole case, and it comes up repeatedly after that; but the first time it is explicitly breached in the novel is when Mycroft meets with Holmes and Watson to tell them, more precisely, what he believes is expecting them in Holyroodhouse:

“I do not suppose that even you, Sherlock, can know the precise number of times that attempts have been made on the life of her Majesty during her reign.”

[...] Holmes turned to his brother. ‘I know that there have been several such attempts, at the very least,’ he said.

‘There have in fact been nine,’ replied Mycroft. [...] ‘You see, they are a peculiar collection of crimes: All were perpetrated by quite young men – mere youths, really. All used pistols as their weapons of choice; yet in every case save the first and the penultimate, the pistols were charged but loaded only with wadded newsprint.’

Holmes's every muscle seemed to grow tense at these words – but he made no move. ‘That was not mentioned in the accounts given to the newspapers,’ he said quietly. [...] ‘I suppose that all of them received the punishment of the few that I remember: “not guilty by reason of insanity,” with either a term in a lunatic asylum or transportation to the colonies as the condition.’

Mycroft Holmes nodded. [...] ‘[The] simple fact was that, because the young men all appeared to be so deranged, no decent English jury could ever be made to bring the full force of the law down upon their heads.’” 67/69

As we can see, insanity is introduced as rather more of an active threat to the safety of the empire as one could have guessed initially. This even intensifies as Mycroft's account of the situation goes on, when he evokes the possibility that agents of the Kaiser may back another assassination attempt on Victoria, as he presents the German ruler himself as a madman:

“[F]acts have often demonstrated that [the Kaiser's] behaviour lies quite outside the control of any fellow human, whether indulgent grandmother, talented statesman – or qualified mental specialist...” 76

Mycroft's quick presentation is underlaid by the very Victorian conviction that sanity is all about “control” -over one's actions, emotions, beliefs. This is also the reason behind his

obsession for secrecy; indeed, according to him, if the details he has revealed to Holmes and Watson were to be made public, all hell would break loose and the very stability of the Empire (not to mention Victoria's safety) would be threatened like never before. In other words, in order for the Queen to be safe, she has to appear safe; there is, again, a strong link between appearances and reality, and we understand that a similar reason prompted Watson to chronicle the case but not to publish it: if he had made public his (and Holmes's) doubts about the supernatural and the “power of ghosts”, he would have appeared much like one of the madmen Mycroft refers to.

The threat of insanity reappears later in the narrative, in a much more explicit passage that we have already alluded to: the first time Holmes and Watson meet Alison Mackenzie in the west tower of the Palace. We have already said that they merely hear her moaning at first, as if the two traumatic situations she is facing (her pregnancy and the presence of the ghost which terrifies her) were so powerful that she was no longer able to master her own behaviour, much less her language. The setting in itself says much: she is in a closed space, alone, in the dark, that reminds one very much of a prison cell or a patient's ward in a Gothic asylum. The first words that Watson addresses to the girl are also of particular interest:

“Please!’ I said [...] ‘Do not be alarmed,’ I went on, steadying my voice. ‘I am a friend, sent by friends, and I am a doctor. I am not an agent either of the royal family's or the duke's – you have my word upon it. I know that you may flee, without the possibility of my following – but I do not know why. What misfortune keeps you in this dead place? And what may I do to assist you?’” 129

Rightly identifying the distress felt by Alison Mackenzie and interpreting her moans as a cry for help, Watson immediately introduces himself not only as a “friend” but as a “doctor”; this is also the reason why Holmes asked him to talk to the girl first rather than doing it himself. Indeed, though Holmes's actions eventually enable people to recover from their trauma, the detective is usually unable to comfort them and reassure them, because of his lack of empathy; Watson, on the other hand, is ever ready to help his fellow man. As we have said before, both are after the same goal (*i.e.* tracking down the criminal and unravelling the mystery) but for different reasons: Holmes is merely there for the thrill of the chase, whereas Watson is really concerned with nursing back the client to safety and sanity. However, in order to do their jobs right, both Holmes and Watson need to understand the origin of the disease or the circumstances leading to the present mystery; in other words, Watson's job as a doctor is made up of a different kind of investigation as Holmes, but an investigation nonetheless, and this is precisely what he tells Alison Mackenzie here: if she does not tell him

why she is afraid, he will never be able to help her.

Of course, one could argue that Alison Mackenzie is not merely locked away in that room because she has become a nuisance to Will Sadler; her imprisonment can indeed be seen as a metaphor for the way the Victorian society treated women, especially girls put “in this predicament” (as Watson says it very nicely p.132). Her true crime, indeed, is a crime of non-conformity with the Victorian values; and that much can be said of all the criminals in the novel: Lord Francis Hamilton, though he initially appeared as a true Victorian aristocrat, mingles with low-born Scottish criminals and betrays the confidence of the Queen in the pursuit of financial gain, even going so far as to disguise himself into a Scottish nationalist early in the novel. In fact, Lord Francis himself is repeatedly analysed as a madman by Holmes and Watson, during the scene in which Holmes reveals to Watson that the aristocrat is truly the mastermind behind the crime: Mrs Hackett calls him a “wicked, wicked master” (179) and an “evil monster” (180) and, as the discussion continues, it becomes clear that what Watson especially blames Lord Francis Hamilton for is having a “dual nature” (182), i.e. not being what he appears to be. The idea of duality being associated with wickedness, and the opposition between appearances and reality seen as a threat, are in fact present at multiple occasions throughout the novel, some of which we have already mentioned; one of the scenes in which it is quite visible is when Holmes and Watson go to the lair of the villains, The Fife and Drum, where they meet the Sadler brothers for the first time:

“Both were approximately thirty years of age, handsome and so similar in appearance that they could have been nothing but brothers. They were of that dark-haired and rather romantic type that one sometimes finds in the North, as well as Scotland [...].

The first of the two, whom I took to be Robert, was a respectable enough specimen, with a good-natured face and an expression in his brown eyes that I could well imagine inspiring trust [...]. The other of the two, meanwhile, was clearly the rogue we had come to engage.

He seemed to have all of his brother's physical power; but while his brother's aspect was amiable, Will Sadler's every feature might have been hewn, like the pub itself, out of the very rock that surrounded the place. Set against all that darkness and angular strength, however, was a pair of blue eyes that would have fitted a woman's face as well as a man's, and which doubtless had the power to lower the defences of even the more sceptical among the fair sex.” 158/159

Watson's analysis, this time, turns out to be entirely correct: beyond the purely physical likeness of the two brothers (detailed in the first paragraph), they are opposed in nature because they do not have the same attitude towards the outside world. Whereas Robert Sadler's appearance immediately inspires sympathy in Watson, who deems it “respectable enough” because he sees no trace of duplicity in him, Will's “rogue”-like nature can be

inferred from the duality that is immediately perceptible in him: Watson emphasises the ambiguity of his eyes and the impossibility to characterize them in definite terms, and he quotes them as the source of Will Sadler's power (as well as of his wickedness) precisely because of this ambiguity. A few pages later, an even better example of Will Sadler's dual nature is given by Watson:

“I turned along with Holmes to face [him]; and discovered for the first time, in his features, the cool, cruel gaze of a man capable of the kind of injuries we knew to have been inflicted on the palace victims.
[...] I grew only further unnerved by the subsequent speed and ease with which the appealing liveliness of his light eyes and his easy smile returned. I now saw that this was an antagonist humbler in his origins, but every bit as formidable, as some of the worst killers we had ever faced.” 167/168

As a proper Victorian, Watson cannot help but feel “unnerved” by the instability in the easy-shifting identity of Will Sadler: as he is both able to be amiable and threatening without any apparent transition, he is completely unpredictable -and therefore threatening. One could argue, somewhat fairly, that Holmes himself is portrayed in a similar way, both in the canon and in *The Italian Secretary*; but regardless of his moody nature, his addiction to drugs or his habit of asking questions apparently unrelated to the matter at hand, Holmes is the hero and always presented as such in the narrative: consequently, one cannot imagine him performing actions that do not correspond to his heroic essence. Holmes's non-conformity and, consequently, the implicit threat that he might represent to the Victorian ideology is nonetheless made problematic on several occasions in the narrative, not as much by Watson as by Mycroft, and he gives the reason for it in this passage:

“I became so accustomed, in our youths, to that streak of sarcasm which my brother often tried to pass off as wit, that I sometimes fail to appreciate his meaning, even in adulthood.” 84

Mycroft is right to be wary as Holmes is indeed a master of deception and misdirection, two exercises he practices on a daily basis in the canon as in *The Italian Secretary* and that both the reader and Watson are accustomed to: his disguises, his habit never to discuss a case unless he has all the elements he needs, his taste for the theatrical or even his joy at puzzling his interlocutors with unannounced and seemingly unrelated questions are key elements of his character, after all. But what Mycroft is more afraid of what he calls Holmes's “fanciful notions concerning the history of Holyroodhouse” (64) because he feels that not only will they get in the way of the investigation (“I hope I have not made an error in enlisting your help, Sherlock – I assure you, this matter shall require as great a seriousness of purpose as you can muster” 65), but also because they are, as we have already said, a matter which the

Victorian ideology wish to be swept under the carpet. The position of the Queen herself, as Watson explains at the end, is not quite as clear as we have said it to be earlier:

“Her Majesty [...] wished very much to know if we had seen or heard anything that might shed light upon the ancient legend concerning a wandering spirit in the palace. Whatever frank answers Holmes and I might have been tempted to give were artfully thwarted by Mycroft” 253

Interestingly enough, it would seem that Mycroft and the Queen embody two contrary aspects of the Victorian age: an insatiable curiosity and the desire to have a definite answer to ontological questions (is there a life after death?), opposed to the fear that the exploration of unknown might prove too unsettling and challenge one's sanity and safety. That irrational fear of the unknown, of the Other, is precisely what we will continue to examine in our next sub-part, this time turning our attention not to the dead but to the living, as we analyse how characters like Mycroft or Watson enact the culture of imperialism and xenophobia in their relations to the Other.

c) “The sky fills with familiar eagles”: xenophobia and imperialism

We have already had the occasion, in another paper, to demonstrate how much *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* were pervaded by Victorian views on Britishness and imperialism. To repeat the whole development here would be quite tedious and a little pointless, so we will sum things up: suffice to say that the notion of identity in the canon is linked both to one's representation of the world and one's self-representation to the world, and that these two processes are deeply linked to an opposition between the British and the rest of the world. Conan Doyle's crime writings tend, through the choices of villains, settings and backstories, to epitomize this tendency: it is always the Other (and often the foreign) that threatens the stability and unity of a society. It may be implicit in most of the cases, but it is extremely striking in a few: *The Sign of the Four*, for example, revolves around the murders of former British officers turned rogue by a particularly vicious Indian native. Another story, *The Crooked Man*, explores the terrible consequences of the jealousy of one British officer during the Indian Mutiny in 1857, that completely jeopardize proper social order by breaking apart a family and turning a promising and innocent officer into a shell of a man. *The Yellow Face*, one of the short stories that is often accused of racism nowadays, is analysed by Jean-Pierre Naugrette and Gilles Menegaldo as the threat of a tainted blood that can undermine one's place in society as well as one's sense of belonging to it.⁹⁰ In other words, as the frequent patriotic discourses in the canon show as well, the British sense of identity and unity was,

⁹⁰ Naugrette and Menegaldo, *op.cit.*

during the Victorian era, defined in opposition to other cultures, and relied on wariness -or even paranoia. It is an aspect that Carr develops in *The Italian Secretary* as well, in relation as we have said to the notion of non-conformity, showing the Victorian ideology as one that favours exclusion to the detriment of inclusion. Interestingly enough, it is Watson who first voices this concern about Mycroft's possible paranoia (Mycroft being, as we have said, one of the three character that stands for Victorianism in the novel, the others being Watson himself and the Queen), when deciphering his telegram:

“in making such an obvious reference to the service revolver that he knew me to carry during our most dangerous cases, Mycroft indicated only that he believed our antagonists in the present business to be capable of extreme violence – arguably (given the fates of the two men who were the apparent subjects of the case) a superfluous warning.” 31

Mycroft's telegram is, in many respects, a perfect embodiment of Victorian paranoia; the most obvious clue being that, like many other things in the novel, its true meaning is protected by a code. In fact the beginning of the narrative reads very much like a spy novel as a whole, as Holmes and Watson enter a world of secret agents and conspiracies to kill the Queen. We have already referred to Victorianism as a culture of the secret; however we have not yet shown the importance that this topic takes in the narrative, even as the plot moves away from political fiction and closer to the Gothic. The character of Victoria is, in this respect, extremely important, as she is the object of several revelations at the beginning of the novel; the first one comes as a joke, with Holmes revealing to Watson that Mycroft enjoys a “*singular informality*” with her, *i.e.* that he is allowed to be “*seated in the presence*”, a revelation that Watson initially deems “extraordinary” and “too fantastic” to be true (all quotes on pp.13/14), but that is afterwards confirmed by the two concerned parties. We have already mentioned the second revelation about Victoria, concerning the number of attempts that have been made on her life, but what we have not mentioned and which may be of interest here is that this revelation adds a new layer of secrecy to the whole plot: the public had to be be lied to concerning the number of attempts, otherwise they would know “how vulnerable she truly is” (72), but Mycroft adds that in order to fully protect Victoria, she is being lied to as well. Mycroft explains that she “has systematically dismantled nearly every organisation put in place over a span of generations to guard the royal person. In this, as in all things, she prefers to rely on a few trusted servants” (*ibid.*); consequently, the very nature of Holmes's and Watson's presence is revealed to be a secret, even from the Queen, as both have been employed by Lord Salisbury because of the danger he believed Victoria was unwittingly facing.

The danger, precisely, that Mycroft alludes to is summed up in this encoded sentence: “the sun burns too hot, the sky fills with familiar eagles” (9). As he explains it later, the “eagles” metaphor has been chosen not only because they are birds of prey, but also because they are the symbol of Prussia, the Kaiser of which is believed to be backing another assassination attempt on the Queen. What Mycroft does *not* explain, however, is the choice of the term “familiar”: it may be an implicit reference at the familial bonds between Victoria and the Kaiser, or it may refer to the fact that the eagles is indeed a familiar metaphor for the Prussians, but we believe something more is at stake. One could argue that Carr had Mycroft put “familiar eagles” instead of “eagles” (which would have done the job) to emphasise the increasing threat that Prussia represented in the eyes of the British towards the end of the Victorian era.⁹¹ By the turn of the century, the Germans had replaced the French as the traditional scapegoats; it is no wonder that the only two Germans we find in the canon are villains and spies (one is only mentioned as a highly qualified international agent called Hugo Oberstein, in both *The Second Stain* and *The Bruce-Partington Plans*, two highly important state affairs; the other is Von Bork, the spy Holmes and Watson take out on the eve of the First World War in *His Last Bow*). In *The Italian Secretary*, however, the Prussians are not the only threat that looms over Holyroodhouse; indeed, everything and everyone that is associated with Otherness in any way becomes, in Watson's eyes, a suspect. There is, of course, another character who is explicitly foreign: David Rizzio himself. In his case, the threat he represents is explicitly linked to his foreign origin: the other characters refer to him as “the Italian secretary” or “the Italian gentleman”, he announces his presence by humming a tune in Italian and the only line he speaks is: “*Signorina... signorina... it is almost time...*” (p.144). Of course, he does not speak the line himself, but the person that is impersonating him relies on the mysterious nature of the foreign culture (at least, mysterious for Allison Mackenzie, the intended victim) to elicit fear in his listener. Even the leaflet that Hamilton and the Sadlers designed emphasise the ghost's longing for revenge against a whole nation (p. 142). But threats also come from within: in Watson's eyes, Scotland appears quite early on as a land of age-old nightmares and mysteries, but also of quite contemporary threats, as Holmes and Watson see their train attacked by a Scottish nationalist, apparently blaming the English for the murder of Dennis McKay (this nationalist is late revealed to be none other than Hamilton in disguise and his reference to Dennis McKay, nothing more than a false lead). The final revelation therefore comes as an ironical surprise, when the criminal is revealed to be, in fact,

⁹¹ The only real chronological indication we have on the case is that it is set after Bismarck's death, because Mycroft refers explicitly to that event p.75; this would place the case at the turn of the century, since the “Iron Chancellor” (as Mycroft calls him) died in 1898.

an insider and not an outsider, so someone that was supposed to be above suspicion.

Carr's goal, in *The Italian Secretary*, transcends the simple (and simplistic) exercise of criticizing the Victorians from a 21st-century viewpoint; his approach to the question is too systematic, too complex, too developed to leave it at that. We would like to argue now that Carr's novel is not merely about the Victorians and their relation to a problematic past, but rather about our own contemporary perception of the notion of tradition and legacy, as well as a reflection on what Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham have described as Victorian "haunting."

3] Tradition and (post-)modernity: the writer as ghost-writer?

a) The writer as ghost-writer: hauntology and post-modern deconstruction

According to Patricia Pulham and Rosario Arias, the reason contemporary artistic production is still so concerned with the Victorian era is because we are still surrounded by incarnations of its production (in urban architecture, in literature, in painting...); they quote Cora Kaplan's analysis of Victoriana as "the astonishing range of representations and reproductions for which the Victorians – whether as the origin of late twentieth century modernity, its antithesis, or both at once – is the common reference."⁹² Neo-Victorianism, then, is the expression of a nostalgia, and seeks to "[reanimate] Victorian genres" (p.XV), to bring the Victorian novel back from the dead -with a vengeance. That Caleb Carr should be concerned with matters of the past is fairly logical -after all, he is a historian; that *The Italian Secretary* should revolve around the notion of haunting is understandable as well, for the ghost of David Rizzio pervades most of the literary space. Of course, one can no longer think of literary ghosts without alluding to Jacques Derrida's famous theory of hauntology, that Pulham and Arias also analyse in their introduction, presenting Derrida's ghost as "a liminal presence, out of time, dislocated, and characterized by 'temporal disjoining'"; they also quote Colin Davis's description of the ghost as "a deconstructive figure hovering between life and death, presence and absence, and making established certainties vacillate".⁹³ This is exactly how Carr is using the ghost: its textual presence (he is never actually seen by the characters, they merely hear him) is enough to jeopardize all of Watson's Victorian beliefs about the world. Interestingly enough, the ghost -or rather, the *ghosts* (we must not forget the ghost haunting Baker Street, that caused the feud between Holmes and Mrs Hudson)- also have a

⁹² Cora Kaplan, *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism* (2007), p.3, in Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham, *op.cit.*

⁹³ Derrida's quote is from *Spectres of Marx* (1993), p.19, reproduced in Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham, *op.cit.* p.XVI; Colin Davis's is from "Haunted Subjects: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis and the Return of the Dead" (2007), p.11, reproduced in *op.cit.* p.XVII

similar impact on the reader, as they reveal a side of the canon that was never seen before: a narrative point of view explicitly challenged and mostly a side of Sherlock Holmes that is, apparently, irreconcilable with what the reader and Watson know about the character. Consequently, like Watson, the reader is thrown into an alien atmosphere where nothing is what it appears to be, and where all the certainties established by the canon seem to be constantly problematized.

On the other hand, one could argue that Carr's deconstruction of the canon is motivated by a desire to pay homage to the strength of Conan Doyle: after all, throughout the canon, Holmes and Watson have always seen their beliefs and visions of the world put to the test by the mysteries they investigated, even though it was more explicit in some cases (*A Study in Scarlet*, *The Dancing Men*, *The Yellow Face*, *The Final Problem*, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*...) than in others. This is even what the canon is about: confronting a system of thoughts to something alien, to see if the system can include it. Where Carr differs from Conan Doyle, of course, is that he has a post-modern perspective on it all; consequently, in *The Italian Secretary*, the Victorian vision of the world that Holmes and especially Watson represent is tried like never before, and a drastic re-evaluation of the usual way of looking at the world becomes necessary. By the end of the novel, then, the ever-rational heroic duo is forced to take into account an emerging science that is more interested in subjectivity, feelings and thoughts than in any factual evidence: psychology (and psychoanalysis). While this initially seems to be a far cry from Holmes's and Watson's very down-to-earth attitude in the canon, one could actually argue that the transformation that the two detectives undergo in *The Italian Secretary* is in fact in keeping with the almost pathological need to explain everything that is present in the Victorian approach to sciences, and of which *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* are a perfect illustration. It is as if Carr used the ghost to try and deconstruct the two characters of Holmes and Watson, extracting them from a purely Victorian frame of reference to assess their relevance to 21st-century readers; in which case, it is a success: through a deep questioning of his own prejudices, Watson becomes able to see the world anew and accept the possibility of Otherness, without giving up his desire to explain it. In this respect, the two characters can be opposed to Mycroft, who remains the perfect Victorian through and through: even the proximity of the ghost and the strange events taking place at Holyroodhouse are not enough to cause a change in his perspective.

In other words, Carr is using the ghost to toy with Conan Doyle's creation and question not its availability to 21st-century writers, but rather its relevance in a non-Victorian context. By placing Holmes and mostly Watson in front of the prejudices and self-contradictions of the

Victorian perception of the world, he poses a challenge unlike any they have faced in the canon. The fact that they overcome this challenge, and that Watson chooses to write an account in spite of the case being “a source of recurring doubts” (2) means that the two characters are ready for a post-modern treatment, in which the detective would be more someone who asks questions than someone who gives answers. In doing so, Carr reminds us once more of the proximity between Holmes and Socrates, that we have already alluded to: someone who enables others to work their way out of problematic experiences and prejudices, in order to adopt a wider perspective on reality. The question of the updating can be asked once again here, as the way Carr treats the two heroes is quintessentially post-modern; however, the temporal confusion in the text, as well as the sensation expressed several times by Watson “of being grasped and dragged back – into a terrible past” (198), both created by the juxtaposition of elements belonging to different eras and the blurring of the boundaries between the past and the present (what was thought as the past keeps coming back to inform the present), make it tricky to use the notion of “updating” without creating further confusion. But perhaps confusion is what Carr is after, as the ghost of David Rizzio turns the world of Holmes and Watson upside down, and perhaps this is the true reason for the lack of any “reassuring conclusion” (3) at the end of the novel; the ghost-writer, then, becomes more of a poltergeist, whose sole aim is to challenge Conan Doyle's legacy.

b) The writer as poltergeist? A comedy of (t)errors:

By focusing so much on the darkest aspects of *The Italian Secretary*, we may have given the reader a slightly biased view of the novel: Carr's narrative is full of humour, like many of the canonical stories. One cannot help, however, but notice a slight change in the type of humour that is used: whereas, in the canon, most of the comical elements stemmed from Holmes's dry wit and irony and from the repetition of cliché situations (especially the revelation scene, when Holmes leaves everyone flabbergasted), Carr adds a dimension of absurd and subversive humour, which seems to jar with the highly dramatic situations the characters are faced with. This, we might argue, is a means to defuse the tension, but also another way to debunk Victorian prejudices and preconceived ideas by showing that everything is always more complicated than it seems at first. The very essence of the plot is a battle for the control of the dead queen's chamber in order to use it as a tourist attraction, a harmless enough motive which nonetheless results in at least two murders (Sinclair and McKay), one accidental death (Lord Hamilton), one execution (Will Sadler) and a maiming (Hackett's eye). The very location of the money, under the Queen's mattress, seems to be some

kind of absurd joke, and the scene in which Watson throws himself upon it to try and assess how much money the villains have hidden in it reads like slapstick comedy:

“Holmes inserted his arm nearly up to the elbow, then said, ‘I can only tell you, Watson, that I am glad I passed the night *beneath* the bed, rather than *upon* it. But perhaps you would care to...?’

Shrugging once – for I did not, to be honest, begin to suspect what he was hinting at – I turned round and rather cavalierly threw myself upon the mattress: not the most painful experience I have ever endured, but certainly one of the most shocking, given what one expects of aged, dilapidated beds. ‘Good Lord, Holmes!’ I cried, getting to my feet as though I had leapt into scalding water. ‘It’s everywhere – almost the entire surface of the thing!’” 203

This whole scene, in which Holmes, Watson and Hackett inspect Queen Mary's chamber to find evidence of the criminals' misdeeds, is a rather confusing experience for the reader, as it alternates between extremely dark and serious passages (especially at the beginning, when Watson describes the atmosphere of decay and mysterious threat that looms over the place) and straight-forwardly comical ones such as the one we have quoted above, or the one in which Watson realises that the infamous “blood that never dries” is actually not where it should be in the room (204/206). One of the most comical passages is probably the first pages of chapter six, in which Holmes makes a series of revelations to Watson, just as he is taking his breakfast, prompting a gradation in the doctor's reactions that end with:

“I stood up straight, allowing the pistol to drift to my side. ‘What the devil *is* going on?’ I bellowed. Looking for some further way to express my irritation at this rather indirect revelation of the truth, I was able to produce only the rather absurd question: ‘And is it entirely necessary that, whatever it is, it all goes on in my bedroom?’” 185

One could even argue that Lord Francis Hamilton's accidental death is a form of very dark humour relying on dramatic irony, as he dies by triggering a device similar to the one he used at the beginning of the book to try and kill Holmes and Watson. What is perhaps even more interesting is that Carr introduces elements of comical absurdity even in his description of Mycroft, who is treated first and foremost as a comical character throughout the novel, whereas he is supposed to be the perfect incarnation of the Victorian ideology. Aside from the jokes on his weight and his utter disdain for any physical task, the recurring joke about him concerns his privileged attitude to the Queen, a joke that is introduced right from the start:

“[When] I arrived at the castle, I found Mycroft already there, engaged in conversation with [the Queen] in an attitude of – *singular informality*...’
I looked up suddenly. ‘You don't mean to say—’
‘Yes, Watson. He was *seated* in the *presence*. In fact, he told me it is a privilege that he has enjoyed *for a number of years*.’ 13

Watson's response to this revelation and, in fact, the anti-climactic nature of the revelation itself are clearly meant to create a comical effect, especially as it becomes a running gag in the novel until, eventually, Watson is able to verify the truth of the matter with his own eyes. This is clearly meant to be funny, but it may also have a deeper implication than that: by turning such an apparently trivial detail into a momentous revelation in Watson's eyes, Carr shed light on how much Victorian culture relied on dissimulation and deception, even towards ideal citizens like Watson. This may find an echo in the final chapter, when Lord Hamilton's father, the Duke of Hamilton, attempts to “revise the history of recent events as a method of discrediting the tales of his son's infamous behaviour” (252) following the death of the villain; even though the Holmes brothers' battle of wits with the Duke is also recounted by Watson in a comical way, the subversive social commentary is no less present.

One could argue that Caleb Carr is mischievously toying with the Holmes canon, introducing absurd humour as a means of subverting the apparent sternness and rigidity of the Victorian vision of the world. The choice of the settings itself is interesting, as placing the story in Edinburgh conjures up the ghost of Conan Doyle himself, in an ironical way as the author never came back to Scotland as an adult and did everything he could to become as British as possible. There are in fact a number of ironical references to Conan Doyle's life in *The Italian Secretary*, such as his interest in historical novels, especially those by Walter Scott (the sub-plot about the threat that Scottish nationalism poses to the British monarchy may remind one of the argument of *Waverley*), his unfaltering patriotism (paralleled by Watson's own stance on the subject, which is gradually questioned by Holmes) or his fascination for the supernatural at the end of his life. By adding this sort of subversive humour to a seemingly traditional narrative, Caleb Carr takes some distance from the canon and the adaptive tradition; at the same time, his detached irony may in fact remind the reader of Holmes's own perspective on the world, such as it is often portrayed by Watson in the canon.

c) The question of labels:

Now that we have established that the tone of the narrative is a little different from that of the original canon, incorporating more humorous passages but also veering quite decisively towards the Gothic, and that Carr's literary perspective is clearly informed by post-modernism, especially in his relation to history, we may again ask ourselves the question of how to label this adaptation. As the note at the beginning of the narrative and the experience of reading both tend to show, Caleb Carr has tried his best to impersonate Conan Doyle in matters related to the style and the narration: the vocabulary and the syntax that are used are

good imitations of those that were used during the Victorian era and, as we have said, the reader is constantly reminded of how Victorian Watson's narrative perspective is (even though it is made clear by having that perspective challenged by the events that occur). Furthermore, like the two other novels under study (and, after all, like Conan Doyle's original novels) there is some degree of what Gérard Genette called "forgery" in it, as the reader is supposed to believe that *The Italian Secretary* is not a work of fiction written by Caleb Carr, but the report of an actual investigation written by Dr. John H. Watson, M.D. However, perhaps because Carr does not elaborate on the hundred-years' gap or give any actual reason for the delay in the publication of the narrative (unlike what is usually the case, as we have seen with both Horowitz and Dibdin), one may argue that the dimension of forgery is not what interests him most. It is not exactly a pastiche either, at least not in the same sense as *The House of Silk* for example: whereas Horowitz's novel can be understood and enjoyed as a continuation of the canon or as an introduction to it, even by someone who does not actually know that much about the original adventures of Holmes and Watson, *The Italian Secretary* is in such an intricate hypertextual relationship with *The Hound of the Baskervilles* that someone who would read Carr's book without a good knowledge of the hypotext would probably fail to understand the piece.

In other words, in the purely stylistic sense of the term, *The Italian Secretary* is a pastiche, as Carr tries his best to impersonate Conan Doyle, who is here seen quite literally as a ghost-writer whose shadow looms over the whole novel with an even more perceptible presence than that of David Rizzio's; however, narratively speaking, it is more of a variation on one of Conan Doyle's best-known works. As in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, the question that lies at the heart of the narrative is that of one's relationship with a difficult past that cannot be escaped (because the curse is supposedly passed on from generation to generation in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, and because the ghost is intrinsically bound to the palace in *The Italian Secretary*), and in both novels the two heroes (mostly Watson) are taken literally out of their comfort zone at the heart of modernity to a place in which time seems to have stopped, allowing the dead to return and supernatural events to take place. However, the main difference between the two is that in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, the mystery is fully explained at the end of the novel by Holmes, who appears, once more, as a champion of Victorian rationality, whereas in *The Italian Secretary* the supernatural remains a valid hypothesis, thus marking any purely rational explanation as a biased simplification of the events. The difference is perhaps the place given to subjectivity in the narrative: while Conan Doyle's attitude was typically ambivalent, making the reader believe that some objective and

purely scientific explanation could be given, and all the while having the story narrated by an increasingly uneasy and lost Watson, Carr's answer is less reassuring but more logical, as he defines the truth as a highly subjective construct. There is no true answer to the question of whether or not the ghost was there in the tower or in Baker Street at the end, only (possibly conflicting) interpretations. In a very post-modern twist, the first scene of the novel thus informs the reader that history and story are both codes that need to be deciphered, like Mycroft's telegram, and that each one projects their personal beliefs and system of values onto historical events and figures. This is exactly the reason for the "strange fascination" Watson hears in Holmes's voice when the detective mentions the Italian secretary for the first time (26): Holmes has identified the ghost as a catalyst, a reagent that will make all the prejudices and the self-contradictions present in the Victorian ideology come to the surface, and he is (as always) welcoming the challenge.

If Horowitz mostly added a social commentary to the holmesian canon, from his 21st-century perspective, Carr chose a more post-modern approach, informed by the derridean concept of hauntology and using a seemingly traditional "Holmes Vs. the supernatural" plot to explore the way that the Victorians saw their own past, and what new meaning could emerge from a confrontation between the Victorian ideology and a subject upon which a consensus was never produced; in doing so, we have argued that Carr was actually testing the availability of Holmes and Watson as character for a contemporary adaptation and paved the way for actual updating. The novel and the graphic novel that we are about to study now are about something quite different altogether, as Dibdin makes it a much more personal challenge against a tradition, an author and a character that have impacted modern culture like no others. Yet, in spite of his radical and deconstructive approach, we will also discuss Michael Dibdin's dark twist on the detective in terms of literary homage, an homage quite different but perhaps more heart-felt than Horowitz's or Carr's.

C) *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story*: battling with the "Great Other" (Lacan)

Michael Dibdin's *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story* is clearly the most radical adaptation of Conan Doyle's creation of the three novels under study. Before we begin our detailed analysis and in order to understand exactly how different Dibdin's approach to the canon is from Horowitz's or Carr's, we thought it necessary to provide our readers with a quick summary of the novel. The plot starts with Watson announcing his future marriage with Mary Morstan to Holmes, who reacts in a very disapproving way. However, the two friends soon put their differences aside, as Lestrade barges in, requesting Holmes's help on the Ripper case

and presenting him with a letter written by the killer. Watson goes to examine the bodies of Annie Chapman, then of Elizabeth Stride and Catherine Eddowes; not long afterwards, Holmes begin forming suspicions about the killer, whom he thinks is watching them from the “empty house” (64) on the other side of Baker Street. He eventually tells Watson about Professor Moriarty, whom he believes to be Jack the Ripper and to kill “merely to keep himself amused, [...] to stave off *ennui*” (68) and to see the British empire crumble. As the hunt goes on, Holmes's relations with the police grow tense, as the plans he devises to catch the Ripper (with the police's help) do not seem to work; at the same time, Watson becomes increasingly puzzled at Holmes's erratic behaviour, especially after he finds that the envelope Holmes instructed him to give Lestrade in case the detective was killed by Moriarty, in which there were supposed to be all the proofs gathered by Holmes in his search of the killer, is filled with blank pages. Holmes returns to London after a week of trying to lure Moriarty out in the open, during which his nemesis apparently dressed up as Watson to trap him. Having finally found a pattern in the murders, Holmes and Watson are able to predict when and where the next will take place, and they go to Whitechapel to prevent it; in the course of events, Watson is separated from Holmes and cannot find him again. He eventually witnesses an unbelievable scene: Holmes murdering another prostitute (Mary Kelly); the detective himself is Jack the Ripper/Moriarty! Not knowing what to do, Watson eventually returns to Baker Street, only to find a telegram by Holmes stating that he is chasing after Moriarty, who is trying to escape to the continent; Watson eventually decides not to tell anything to anyone, even more so as he has no proofs of Holmes's guilt. He hastens his marriage to Mary. In the three following years (the “Great Hiatus”) he regularly receives letters from Holmes with news of Moriarty's demise at the Reichenbach Falls, and of the detective's subsequent journeys abroad; following these good news, Watson decides that what he saw was Moriarty dressed as Holmes. The detective eventually return and the two friends resume their partnership, even though Watson no longer lives in Baker Street. In the wake of another murder attributed to the Ripper, Watson's suspicions come back to him, but Holmes's alibi proves to be flawless. However, in 1891, yet another prostitute is found murdered, and Holmes frantically announces to Watson that Moriarty has returned from the dead, and asks his friend's help to deal with his nemesis once and for all. Watson accepts and secretly finds his way into the “empty house” (thanks to a key in Holmes's possession) where he finds damning evidence of his friend's insanity, the worst item being a glass vessel containing a part of Mary Kelly's uterus and the foetus of her unborn child. Watson resolves to do everything in his power to put an end to Holmes's madness, and begins injecting himself with cocaine so

that he can watch Holmes at all times. The two friends flee to the continent, as Holmes is apparently attempting to escape Moriarty, a wild-goose chase that ends climactically at the Reichenbach Falls: Holmes has in fact been leading Watson, whom he believes now to be Moriarty in disguise, there, to finally do away with him. However, in a final moment of epiphany, Holmes realises the full extent of his madness and throws himself off the cliff. Watson, alive but broken, returns to England.

As we are about to argue, the idea behind Dibdin's novel is not mindless and provocative iconoclasm; it is rather a radical but systematic approach to Conan Doyle's legacy, that problematizes precisely the way in which modern culture treats literary icons -a question that Horowitz also asks in *The House of Silk* in some way, but that Dibdin chose to put at the heart of his novel. In a very post-modern way, the whole narrative is concerned with questions of identity and reliability, and urges the reader to adopt a critical posture both towards the canon and towards Dibdin's narrative itself, as we are about to see.

1] Deconstruction as a means of self-affirmation: neo-Victorianism and the Uncanny

a) Who is speaking? Narration and mediation in Watson's accounts:

We have already discussed the “Foreword by the Editors”, and how it helped shape the reader's expectations in Dibdin's novel; suffice to say, then, that his radical approach to the canon is echoed by the extreme reactions of the first (fictional) readers described in this foreword -reactions that the reader does not understand at that point, but that he might very well experience himself upon reaching the end of the novel. *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story* introduces itself first and foremost as a contradiction to more or less everything that has been written by Arthur Conan Doyle; the basis for this claim is, as we have also mentioned, the idea that Watson was in fact Conan Doyle's ghost writer, providing him with accounts of the cases. In turn, Conan Doyle re-wrote the accounts, adding a quite large number of fictional elements in an attempt to bend it to the rules of popular fiction and to the readers' expectations; the extent of his modifications on *A Study in Scarlet* are, for example, “revealed” by Holmes and Watson in the first chapter:

“[A.C.D.] had altered various circumstantial details in the interests of dramatic tension, and had also added a long section of his own invention to provide a suitably grim motive for Hope's revenge. But I felt that all the improvements were well within the bounds of artistic licence” 17/18

'[A.C.D.] has celebrated the complete triumph of your methods and techniques. What more can you possibly ask?'

'Nothing more, Watson, but quite a bit less. For a start, what is this schoolboy yarn about desert of salt and murderous Mormons doing stuck in the middle of my case, like a putty nose on an antique bust?'

'Come, he had to dramatise –'

'Did he, indeed? [...] No doubt the same morbid craving explains that truly remarkable scene in which Hope, half-dead of an aneurism by the by, has to be restrained by four men from precipitating himself from our windows? [...] Perhaps you would be so good as to identify for my benefit the device – classical or otherwise, I'm not particular – which induced Jefferson Hope to present himself that evening to an address to which, not twenty-four hours earlier, he had refused to come, rightly suspecting a trap?'" 19/20

Similar passages in Dibdin's narrative allude to the transformations undergone by others among Watson's accounts, like *The Sign of the Four*, but it seemed to us that this first passage summed best the way in which Conan Doyle is presented within the novel, that is to say, as the exact contrary of what he really was as an author: rather than an author bent on making his two characters appear as real as possible, through the inclusion of many realistic elements in his narrative, he is seen as a fiction writer that cares little about truth or verisimilitude, and whose main goal is to make a good piece of popular fiction, even if that means stepping away from realism. This is a very interesting inversion of the perspective (that goes hand in hand with the portrayal of Holmes and Watson as real, historical figures), and only one of the first attempts at deconstructing Conan Doyle's legacy, in a very post-modern way. It is also in keeping with the way historical figures like Abberline (and "Leather Apron" in Cotte's and Stromboni's adaptation) are introduced in the narrative, a somewhat shocking addition when one knows that Conan Doyle himself never used any non-fictional character (even though he did base Holmes on one of his acquaintances, as we have already discussed); it makes Conan Doyle's stories appear even more like fictions, while stressing at the same time the reliability of Watson's account in *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story* as it gives it more verisimilitude.

All the canonical references present in the novel, whether they are mentioned only in passing or more thoroughly analysed, all serve a similar purpose: to challenge Conan Doyle's authority and make the "true story" behind the published accounts emerge. The whole canon, then, becomes the history of a lie, a lie which originally has no other purposes than to serve what Watson calls "the interests of dramatic tensions" in the first passage, but that eventually develop into something more than that as soon as Watson realises that the revelation that Holmes was Jack the Ripper would destroy his public image as a hero, and reduce his good deeds to nothing. After that, as Watson states clearly in the final pages of the novel, even the accounts he gave Conan Doyle (especially the one concerning Holmes's death at the Reichenbach Falls) were flawed:

"Above all I wanted to impress upon the public mind an image of Holmes's honourable life and noble death; an image so attractive and indelible that if any later searcher should stumble upon the truth (for I could not be sure that

other damning evidence did not exist elsewhere) his assertions would be received with frowns and frigid silence, as being at once tasteless and absurd.

As luck would have it, the perfect sculptor for my monument was at hand. [...] A.C.D. had approached me early in 1891 with a view to obtaining further material from my records of Holmes's cases. [...] What he proposed now was to write a series of short tales, each devoted to one of Holmes's successes.

[...] Early in 1892 he came to see me and proposed that I furnished him with a material for a further twelve tales, the last of which was to be an account of Holmes's death at the Reichenbach falls.

[...] The suggestion could not have fitted in better with my own desires, and I set to work with a will. Eleven of the dozen cases were no trouble to prepare, since I had only to collate and copy out in a fair hand my already-existing notes. But when it came to dealing with Holmes's death I was faced with the singular problem of inventing a plausible series of events that would satisfy the known facts, yet reveal nothing of the terrible truth behind them. I fear I did not manage to concoct a very convincing smoke-screen. Indeed, a close reading of the finished story – which A.C.D. entitled, more aptly than he knew, 'The Final Problem' – will reveal that it is riddled with inconsistencies. But it is part of the business of a good writer to prevent his audience from reading closely if this does not suit his purposes, and when the tale finally appeared any question of its weaknesses went unheard in the general howl of dismay that Holmes was dead and the series at an end. Never had there been such an outcry! A.C.D.'s readers had come to think of Holmes as a valued and trusted friend. My wishes could not have been more fully realised.”⁹⁴
187/189

Following Watson's revelations, the whole canon and, mostly, *The Adventure of the Final Problem*, appeared to have served one purpose only: to turn Holmes into a hero and act as a cover-up for his “infamies” (189). But, by some twisted irony, it is precisely Watson's deathbed confession, in this narrative, that threatens to undo all his work by revealing the extent of his and A.C.D.'s cover-up operation -even though A.C.D. himself was not aware of the “horrible truth” (ibid.). This is, incidentally, one of the major differences between Dibdin's narrative and its graphic novel adaptation by Cotte and Stromboni: the two adapters chose to create a frame for the narrative in which an ageing Watson decides to tell the truth about Holmes to his friend Conan Doyle, rather than having him write the whole thing as a confession. This enables Cotte and Stromboni to surprise the reader (with the framing narrative appearing only p. 96) but also to take their distances from an adaptation that would have been too literal and might not have worked as well (after all, unlike Dibdin's text, *L'ultime défi de Sherlock Holmes* could never have been presented as the manuscript of one of Watson's undocumented cases, because of its very nature as a graphic novel); moreover, it

⁹⁴ Unfortunately, reproducing the whole scene would have taken too much space here, as it spans two pages and a half; however, we do enjoin the reader to read it in full, for we are fully aware that there are complexities and details that we have overlooked, in mentioning only extract.

allows Cotte and Stromboni to give the matter a slightly different ending, which we will discuss in a few pages.

In other words, all the canonical figures that the reader encounters in *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story* are at once familiar and unfamiliar; this proves to be a very disturbing experience for the reader, creating, as it were, two parallel but contradictory realities. Like the some of the fictional editors in the foreword, this ambiguity may prove too much for some, and always lead to a very emotive response to the revelations at the heart of the novel. This ambiguity reminds us very much of Freud's theory of the uncanny, which is one of the topoi in neo-Victorian fiction; consequently, we will now analyse how important this notion is to the full understanding of the novel, through the examination of a handful of key moments in the narrative.

b) An uncanny Holmes:

As Nicholas Royle pointed out (quoted by Rosario Arias in her article “Haunted Places, Haunted Spaces: The Spectral Return of Victorian London in Neo-Victorian Fiction”)⁹⁵, literary deconstruction such as the one we have here is often linked to the sense of the uncanny, because it “makes the most apparently familiar text strange” (Royle, 2003, p.24 in Arias, 2009, 134). This deconstruction is not only felt by the reader in the case of Dibdin's book, but explicitly by Watson himself at two key moments in the narrative. The first one is the moment of epiphany when Watson discovers the true identity of the Ripper:

“The face was familiar. The man was Holmes.

The face was familiar and yet quite strange. Had I not been half-expecting to see my friend, I doubt I would have known him. He was a master of disguise, of course, but this one, like all great inspirations, was simplicity itself. He had darkened his complexion slightly, and added a fine moustache, curled at the tips. The effect was to give his face a distinctly Semitic appearance. [...] It was a truly masterful impersonation, for he had not tried to impose alien features on his own by dint of trickery. Rather, with a few deft touches, he had exposed an alien Holmes, one I had never before seen, but who now seemed to have been there all the while in that face I had come to think of as so characteristically and essentially British.” 109/110

This passage is the perfect introduction for the twist in the narrative, that occurs just a few pages afterwards when Watson observes Holmes methodically inflicting horrors upon the corpse of the prostitute he has just killed (pp.117/118). The heart of the scene is in the first underlined sentence, as it reveals Watson's difficulties with reconciling the face he sees with the image he has of his friend, exactly like he will initially be unable to reconcile the image of Holmes as the Ripper with that of Holmes as the detective. At the same time, as the second

⁹⁵ In Rosario Arias & Patricia Pulham, *op.cit.*

passage indicates, Watson recognises the ambiguity as having always been there, an essential part of Holmes's nature but that had remained in the shadows until that moment. We also cannot fail to remark that his mind immediately links alien and foreign, opposing this new and strange Holmes to the paragon of Britishness he knew; this, along with the reference to his new "Semitic appearance", are two references to the temporal context (the Ripper murders were blamed on the Jewish community at that time, as the arbitrary detention of "Leather Apron" showed) but also to the Victorian rejection of any duality or ambiguity as attributes of Britishness. In the graphic novel, the sense of uncanniness is most present in the actual murder scene, pp.78/79 where, as we can see in the appendix (cf Appendix V), it is graphically very well rendered. Indeed, in order to illustrate the impossibility for Watson to reconcile what he is seeing with his usual frame of expectations, Cotte and Stromboni use a blending of jarring narrative codes: the main image, in which we see Holmes standing near the bed with a knife in his hand, singing *La donna è mobile*, is framed above by a close-up on Watson's eye and below by one on the corpse's skinned face, and on all sides by snapshots of what he is doing with the body; moreover, the lyrics of the song (that, in Dibdin's novel, is identified by Watson only at the end of the chapter) are here pervading the space of the page, giving the whole scene an eerie and hallucinatory feeling.

The second key moment is, obviously, the rewriting of the confrontation between Holmes and Moriarty at the Reichenbach Falls. The deconstruction is even more complete here, because it no longer affects only Holmes: in a very nietzschean turn of events ("battle not with monsters, lest you become a monster; and when you gaze into the abyss, the abyss also gazes into you"), Watson's narrative reliability is compromised, as he is forced to resort to cocaine in order to keep up with Holmes' relentless flight. The reader is therefore estranged from both Holmes and Watson, and starts to distrust the narrative voice: this gives a sense of uncanniness to the ultimate confrontation at the falls, in which the drugged Watson can hardly tell the difference between his hallucinations and the reality:

"I was barely able to hold the gun up. The rock at my feet seemed to be attracting the metal with some magnetic force against which I had constantly to struggle. My reason was hopelessly confused, and my senses prey to delusions of ever-increasing potency. I seemed to hear human voices calling me from the abyss. [...]

The two sides of the waterfall had now parted company. They were swaying in different directions, as if the rock walls were two bones and the water a strip of gristle holding them together. Banshee voices were calling to me from out the abyss, trying to pass on some vital message which I could not understand since they were speaking it backwards. [...]

As I gazed up at that urbane and untroubled countenance, I felt my last grip on reality loosening. Could it possibly be true? Could the man standing

before me conceivably be Jack the Ripper? What hideous mistake had I made? Where had I gone wrong? Was Moriarty even now watching from the other side of the falls, laughing sardonically? At once, sardonic laughter filled the air. It seemed, though, to be coming from Holmes. But then, of course, Holmes was Moriarty!" 178/179

Both the unreliability of Watson's account of the Reichenbach struggle and the shocking nature of Holmes's death can lead the reader to question the climax of the narrative, even more so as Watson himself questions his own sanity up to the last moment, when Holmes tries to kill him, then commits suicide; this is a clever strategy on Dibdin's part, encouraging the reader to imagine yet another revision or deconstruction of the holmesian narrative. In this very post-modern dialogue with the reader, the author implicitly states that his version and Conan Doyle's version are both flawed and unreliable appropriations of the same story. One may recall that, in *The Final Problem*, Watson is not present at the climactic moment and can only know what happened thanks to Holmes's last written words before he meets his demise; in fact, neither Watson nor any other character than Holmes is present when Moriarty is directly seen in the canon, a fact which is probably at the root of Dibdin's rewriting. If Watson is indeed present in Dibdin's text, he is under influence, as we have seen: consequently, in neither cases is the narrative truly reliable.

Even though Dibdin's story is profoundly disturbing (instead of reassuring) for the readers, as it smashes to pieces every pre-conceived idea they had about Holmes and Watson, it does apparently provide the reader with a closed ending: the criminal mind behind the Ripper murders is revealed to be Holmes, and he commits suicide before Watson's eyes in order to prevent any return of his serial-killing other self. However, we have already discussed the fact that Watson's perspective is (at best) biased and that he is prone to rewriting or omitting the truth -after all, it is what he has been doing by keeping the secret behind Holmes's disappearance concealed: the point of this deathbed confession is to acknowledge that he has been telling and writing lies.⁹⁶ The readers are therefore left with a doubt, adding perhaps yet another post-modern twist to this story in the form of this question: am I reading the 'truth' about Holmes's death, or yet another 'lie'?

2] Not a pastiche: Collaboration as the normal mode of literary production?

This sense of uncanniness is in fact a manifestation of the way Dibdin has imagined and

⁹⁶ This is even more perceptible in Cotte's and Stromboni's adaptation, as Watson still keeps some details hidden from Conan Doyle, mainly the fact that he did cocaine in order to keep a constant watch over Holmes (in the graphic novel, he uneasily laughs and says "I might be more of a tea person, but I think I have never drunk as much coffee in my life as during that period of time!" - "Bien que je sois un grand amateur de thé, je crois que je n'ai jamais bu autant de café qu'à cette période-là!", p.107).

carried out his adaptation of the holmesian canon. We believe, indeed, that *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story* is essentially different from both *The House of Silk* and *The Italian Secretary* as it does not define itself as a pastiche, and does it quite explicitly on the second paragraph of the very introduction of the book:

“No, it really won't do. I thought it might give my story a little more conviction if I tried at least to echo A.C.D., but I cannot even manage that.”

13

A pastiche, as Julie Sanders reminds us, is when one tries to mimic the style of a previous author, which is explicitly the case in the two other novels under study: the reader can logically assume that the John Watson who is writing in both Carr's and Horowitz's adaptations is intended to be the same character who narrated nearly all of Conan Doyle's original stories -an assumption that is made even more self-evident by the fact that both authors have tried their best to imitate Conan Doyle's narrative pace and to use 19th-century English. If Dibdin has indeed done the latter (his John Watson being still essentially the same character, therefore a man of the 19th century), he did not comply with the other rules of the pastiche, and did not hesitate in departing quite clearly from the canon -especially in the hallucinatory sequences (that we have already studied) and in the several passages in which Watson is trying to work out what to do with Holmes's secret. These passages are long forays into Watson's psyche, in a way that may remind us of the less narratively daring forms of streams of consciousness, without any actual event happening; in other words, they are precisely the sort of things that one would never find in Conan Doyle (even in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, which does give more room to Watson's thoughts and feelings than the other works that compose the canon). The same remark can be made about the central topic of madness and the portrayal of Sherlock Holmes as a monster; the latter, mostly, would never have been accepted by Conan Doyle (one may recall that he thought it wrong to make the criminal a hero, as we have already said).

What, then, is exactly the nature of Dibdin's adaptation? Even though it attempts to pass itself off as a real manuscript written by Watson (indeed, the only one actually written by Watson that the reader can ever find), it is not a forgery in purely genettian terms, as it does not replicate Conan Doyle's style and creates a new type of narrative that is quite different from any pre-existent Sherlock Holmes novel; but then again, it is meant to be the only reliable account of Sherlock Holmes's life and death that one can find, so its difference from the rest is essential rather than incidental. One must, perhaps, consider the circumstances in which the book was written in order to form a definite picture of its purpose: *The Last*

Sherlock Holmes Story is Michael Dibdin's very first published work, after which he went on to write a series of hard-boiled crime fictions set in contemporary Italy -in other words, something altogether different. Dibdin taking possession of another author's characters and world, and reshaping them, was perhaps a way for him to try and find his own literary voice, as well as to make room for himself in the literary landscape. We would like to argue that the novel can be seen as a form of collaboration from beyond the grave between Conan Doyle and Dibdin -at least, that this is how Dibdin sees it. Julie Sanders, in her *Adaptation and Appropriation*, quotes Jean Marsden's analysis of the way contemporary writers see Shakespeare's work (in *The Appropriation of Shakespeare*, 1991), that can also be applied to Conan Doyle in Dibdin's case:

“each new generation attempts to redefine Shakespeare's genius in contemporary terms, projecting its desires and anxieties onto his work.” (48)

As Shakespeare himself did with his sources, Dibdin creates a link between Conan Doyle's body of hypotexts and his own hypertext by using the former's fictional universe as a sandbox for his own imagination; in fact, one can find in *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story* some topics that would become central to Dibdin's original work, like the attention paid to the social and economic context, the dark and grim atmosphere, the isolation of the hero, and the difficulties faced by the police in conducting investigations (among other things). In other words, he invests the world of Holmes and Watson with a new and personal perspective, but it remains the world invented by Conan Doyle, even more so as he himself is given the part of an adaptor in his universe. The collaboration between Dibdin and Conan Doyle is echoed, in the narrative, by Dibdin's fantasy of a collaboration between “A.C.D.” and Watson. In *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story*, this fantasized collaboration aims, as we have seen, at turning Holmes into a popular (and fictional) hero, and is motivated by the need to embellish the “real thing”; one might even argue that it is in fact respectful of the canon, in a way, since it shows all the efforts made by Watson and an oblivious “A.C.D.” to not make the hero the criminal (in a clever inversion of Conan Doyle's original quote).

The major twist introduced in Dibdin, however, is not so much Holmes's split personality (after all, as we have said, Holmes is always the only person who is present when his nemesis shows up, and Dibdin was not the first one to voice this theory) as the inclusion of Arthur Conan Doyle as a character within his own universe. To complete our analysis of the novel, we will now analyse in details what this decision implies in terms of legacy and homage, using more precisely Michael Benton's analysis of biomythography.

3] Biomythography: killing the father or deifying him?

a) Watson versus Holmes: Battling the "Great Other"

The battle of wits between Watson and Holmes at the end of the novel can be interpreted as well as a metaliterary struggle between Dibdin and the shadow of ACD. That struggle is not about the recognition that Dibdin's own version of Holmes -in fact, that *any* version of Holmes- is worth as much (or as little) as the whole doylean tradition, but about a young author trying to establish himself precisely as this: an author. And what better way to do so than to challenge "the dean of detective fiction" on his own grounds? Much like Watson at the end of the novel, who has to become much more like Holmes, even in his bad sides, in order to finally overpower him, Dibdin is constantly challenging ACD by multiplying the references to the canon. In psychoanalytical terms, this resembles very much the Oedipus complex as it was analysed by Jacques Lacan: in order to truly accomplish one's own potential, one has to step out of the comfort zone and battle the "Great Other", who is both feared and looked up to. This challenge is echoed in the text by Watson's struggle with Holmes at the end, trying to out-wit him and to find a way to stop him, which results in a pyrrhic victory: Holmes does die, but the toll it takes on Watson is great, as we have already discussed; worse, he is plagued with recurring doubts as to the righteousness of his actions. Incidentally, things are quite a bit different in *L'ultime défi de Sherlock Holmes*, but the ending illustrates even better this lacanian reading of the novel: whereas in the novel Watson returns and resumes his activity as a doctor, in the graphic novel he decides to become a detective, rather explicitly choosing to "[follow] in Holmes's footsteps" (124).⁹⁷ The interpretation given by Cotte and Stromboni is rather more positive than Dibdin's original one: the climactic battle at the Reichenbach falls is seen as a changing of the guard, and the whole plot is thus re-interpreted as a sort of extreme initiation narrative, in which Watson learns what it means to be a detective by uncovering the darkest secret of a man he though he knew: his best friend, Sherlock Holmes.⁹⁸ Consequently, even if Watson's battle almost had him go (quite literally) over the edge, its outcome is a positive one; even though it is as positive in Dibdin's novel as it is in Cotte's and Stromboni's graphic counterpart to it, the narrative does end on a rather comforting image:

"Since Holmes's death my existence has been a quiet and commonplace one. But sometimes, as I sit by the fire on nights when the wind wails in the chimney, my thoughts travel back to the great falls at Reichenbach, and I

⁹⁷ The original quote reads "Holmes n'était plus là, j'ai donc pris sa suite." cf Appendix III

⁹⁸ Another detail backs up this interpretation of Cotte's and Stromboni's adaptation: the fact that Watson's doubts are downplayed. In fact, they are only present right after Watson has witnessed Holmes murder Mary Kelly, and only made explicit in one panel, in the bottom right-hand corner of p.94.

hear again the exquisite consolation of Holmes's final words, and I see once more the light of understanding in his eyes, during those last moments when he seemed once again the best and wisest man I have ever known." 190

Holmes himself, in those final moments, has managed to overcome the Great Other he was battling: the dark side of his own psyche, the "monster" created by *ennui* and drug abuse; consequently, he is able to make the greatest sacrifice. His suicide, far from being interpreted as a confession of his own weakness and powerlessness in front of Moriarty, is the act that really turns him into the hero Watson always saw in him, because it effectively removes from the face of the earth the worst criminal that the world has ever seen and to bring order to his nemesis's "nightmare world [...] where paths lead nowhere, words mean nothing, and no one is what he appears" (Dibdin 66).

b) Turning Conan Doyle into "A.C.D.": biomythography and iconoclasm

We do not know if, like Watson, Dibdin's battle almost had him go over the edge; what we do now is that, in order to come to terms with ACD's legacy, he decided to turn him into a character in *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story*. He is present right from the start as Watson's literary agent-cum-ghost writer, as he is the one who polishes the accounts of the cases Watson writes, as we have already discussed. One could think that the aim of this fictionalization of Conan Doyle is to make the world of Sherlock Holmes more realistic, but it would be wrong, since Michael Dibdin's prose is even further from realism than Conan Doyle's was: as we have already discussed, several sequences in the narrative have a dream-like or hallucinatory atmosphere, emphasizing Watson's subjectivity and unreliability -these sequences are even more striking in *L'ultime défi de Sherlock Holmes*, and also more numerous.⁹⁹

One could argue that the idea behind Conan Doyle's transformation into a fictional character in Dibdin's novel is to make him easier to replace as the author. The process is quite common in neo-Victorian fiction, and has been done with other authors, as Ann Heilmann analyses in "The Haunting of Henry James: Jealous Ghosts, Affinities, and The Others" (even though she refers to it as biofiction, because the three novels she studies do not stray that far from James's life; a process similar to what Julian Barnes does for Conan Doyle in *Arthur and George*, for example).¹⁰⁰ Dibdin's approach to the historical figure of Conan Doyle is,

⁹⁹ There is especially true of one sequence from which Watson is absent, and in which the reader follows Holmes narrowly escaping fatal accidents twice as he wanders through the London streets -a reference to a passage in *The Final Problem*, in which Holmes tells Watson about these two events that he presents as attempts on his life made by Moriarty's henchmen.

¹⁰⁰ Ann Heilmann, "The Haunting of Henry James: Jealous Ghosts, Affinities, and The Others," in Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham, op.cit.

however, entirely different as it is based on a purely fictional assumption: that Watson and Holmes did live, with Conan Doyle as their literary agent. The fact that Conan Doyle should be renamed “A.C.D.” by Watson throughout the whole novel is not incidental; it may remind us of another neo-Victorian adaptation in which the author of the hypotext, Charles Dickens, finds himself in a similar position: Peter Carey's 1997 novel *Jack Maggs* (which is a rewriting of *Great Expectations*). Dibdin's fictionalization of Arthur Conan Doyle is closer to what Michael Benton has called “biomythography”: a type of biofiction which “dissolves the distinction between the 'actual life' and the 'posthumous life', between the period of the biographee's existence and the period of biographical interpretation that succeeds it” (Michael Benton, “Literary Biomythography,” 222).¹⁰¹ There are, however, differences, as Dibdin's fictionalization of Conan Doyle is not the focus of the novel, far from it; but its use as a metaliterary device makes it resonate with Benton's analysis. The process is made easier for Dibdin here because Conan Doyle himself blurred the lines between fiction and reality, as we have seen earlier: some people actually believed (though not for long) that he was Watson's literary agent rather than literary father; in fact, by doing so, Conan Doyle attempted to turn himself into some kind of myth (much like other authors like the Brontë sisters did, as Benton points out). The simplest interpretation of why Dibdin is trying to fictionalize Conan Doyle is, as we have argue, to say that Dibdin is trying to loosen Conan Doyle's hold on the characters by symbolically diminishing his creative power (Conan Doyle can no longer be seen as the creator of Holmes and Watson if they were real people). At the same time, it would be a way for Dibdin to asserting his control on the holmesian universe: if Conan Doyle becomes a character in Dibdin's fiction, he can treat him however he likes. This interpretation is however far too simple to be entirely true: no matter how hard the reader or the writer wishes it, Conan Doyle was not a fictional entity but a real person, who was born in 1859 in Edinburgh and died in 1930 in Crowborough; there must be more to the fictionalization of Conan Doyle than a mere question of narrative empowerment for Dibdin.

c) Turning Conan Doyle into “A.C.D.”: biomythography and homage

The second interpretation of Dibdin's attempt at biomythography is more interesting, because it is aimed at almost the exact opposite of what the first interpretation tried to achieve. We will argue here that turning Conan Doyle into a literary character, part of his own fictional universe, is in fact not at all a way to diminish his importance, but a form of homage. Indeed, we can think of it as a celebration of Conan Doyle's attempts at making Holmes and Watson seem real to the reader: by having Conan Doyle and Watson meet at the beginning of

¹⁰¹ The full article can be found online.

the novel and devise a literary arrangement that will become *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, Dibdin implicitly states that the characters have become so real, and that Conan Doyle has put so much of himself in his creation, that they are now indistinguishable from their author. By going this far in his attempt to blur the boundaries between reality and fiction, Dibdin is being, in fact, more canonical in his approach than the two other authors under study, who -at best- simply mingle Holmes and Watson with real characters (Queen Victoria and the occasional reference to Lord Salisbury in *The Italian Secretary*).

The two authors of *L'ultime défi de Sherlock Holmes* go even further in the homage by modelling their Holmes after Jeremy Brett, as we have already said: it is both a celebration of the prominent place Conan Doyle's creation have in popular culture, and an interesting meta-literary reflection on what it means to do a holmesian adaptation. Indeed, Jeremy Brett, who was a prolific English actor, is nonetheless remembered today mostly (if not *only*) for his portrayal of Holmes in the 1984-1994 Granada television series. In a similar way, one cannot help but think that Cotte and Stromboni also had in mind Dibdin's literary career, which was often reduced to his holmesian appropriation, even though he went on to write many other novels afterwards. It would seem that the two works, and especially Cotte's and Stromboni's, are a perfect incarnation of what Zadie Smith said about Victorian novels still being written in the 21st century; and we may wonder if Dibdin's choice to write a neo-Victorian appropriation of Conan Doyle as his first novel was not a way for him to unburden the weight of a tradition in order to feel free to write original novels afterwards. In this respect, Dibdin's battle with Conan Doyle could be linked to Watson's battle with Holmes, an emancipatory struggle against the "Great Other" necessary to really become oneself. Still thinking of Zadie Smith's observation, it is also interesting to oppose Dibdin to Horowitz: Dibdin only ever wrote one other adaptation (an Agatha Christie pastiche entitled *The Dying of the Light*), whereas Horowitz kept coming back to it, and *The House of Silk* is only one of many adaptations he has penned.

One may recall our mention of Derrida's "hauntology": Holmes, here, would be seen as a ghost, constantly returning from the dead to cannibalize literature (as well as cinema, illustration, etc), bringing along with him the echoes of a whole world that never was, but that nonetheless creates a feeling of nostalgia in the reader (as Dana Shiller pointed out); with the only way out being to destroy Holmes utterly, by challenging the character in extreme ways, as in *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story*. However, as both Dibdin's novel and Cotte's and Stromboni's adaptations seem to indicate, Holmes's shadow always returns in different ways: in *L'ultime défi de Sherlock Holmes*, Watson becomes a detective, while in *The Last Sherlock*

Holmes Story, the real Holmes “[ceases] to be remembered as a real figure, except by a small circle of acquaintances” and “[becomes] a fictional character” (189). This proves to be yet another twist, and yet another form of homage to Conan Doyle's literary creation, as well as an analysis of the ever-growing popularity of the character. After all, never mind what is written about Holmes: he has returned from the dead once, and he will never stop coming back to haunt us.

Conclusion

Throughout this research paper, we have tried to analyse the ways in which the characters of Holmes and Watson have become part of post-modern culture, a process which we have linked to the old-established tradition of holmesian adaptations. In order to understand not only how and when the characters have been adapted, but also why they are still relevant for an adaptation today, we have divided our research into three chapters. In the first one, we have devoted our analysis to a return to the original canon, to show precisely how Conan Doyle himself had created a new type of popular fiction that evoked different hypotexts (Greek mythology, chivalry novels, sensational literature) but with enough innovations to have a considerable and lasting impact on the reading public. As we demonstrated, this impact was also maximized by Conan Doyle's clever stance on adaptation: he encouraged artists from other media to give their versions of the great detective and his universe (illustrators, like Sidney Paget or Frederic Dorr Steele, or actors like William Gillette, among others) even though their views sometimes clashed with his own.

We continued to explore how the world of Holmes and Watson became available to the adapters in our second chapter, starting from what Conan Doyle did not apparently plan: what holmesian scholars call the “great game”, which is the attempt at accounting for all the self-contradictions and errors present within the canon through the creation of apocryphal narrative, and which has consequently become one of the guiding principles of holmesian adaptations. Having tried to establish general categories of adaptations, and explored the ways in which the five authors under study identified with the different traditions, we compared three key moments in the four narratives to understand their similarities and differences with one another.

Our third chapter saw a change in our perspective, as we tried to assess what new elements the four narratives under study brought to the holmesian universe, and in what way they were full-fledged adaptations rather than mere variations on Conan Doyle's creations. As we turned to a closer analysis of each narrative, the importance of the influence of neo-Victorianism and post-modernism on the five authors became increasingly clear, and we were able to fully analyse their works in terms of typology. This also brought forward a number of questions concerning the ambiguous relations between homage and iconoclasm, especially in the case of Michael Dibdin's *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story* and its graphic novel counterpart by Olivier Cotte and Jules Stromboni. Coming back to the question of

terminology, there is still one question that must be addressed, as it is a recurring question even among critics (one can think, for example, of Mark Llewellyn's several articles on the subject): given their quite different perspectives on the Victorian legacy and how to process it, is it really logical that one should think of all four works under study as being “neo-Victorian” fictions? As much as we have tried to show that Horowitz did criticize the Victorian ideology, he merely scratched the surface when one compares his narrative with Carr's or Dibdin's; similarly, his inclusion of Dickensian hypotexts shows a more wholehearted homage to that period than Carr's or Dibdin's, who do not seem to be interested in celebrating the Victorian classics as much as in challenging them, and exploring how they may haunt us without us even noticing it. In this respect, we would like to end this research paper by proposing another term than neo-Victorian fictions for narratives that, like Dibdin's or Carr's, do not merely re-invest Victorian tropes in order to update them (thus staying in a logic of pure homage and reverence, as it entails the belief that the Victorian novel was so perfect that it needs but a little adjustment in order to be up-to-date) but challenge every aspect of the Victorian culture from a critical, post-modern perspective, celebrating its achievements without forgetting its shortcomings and errors. To this end, we could think of *The Italian Secretary* and *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story* (along with its adaptation) as *post-Victorian* narratives, whereas *The House of Silk* would remain a *neo-Victorian* novel. Then again, the question of labels is a complicated one, and there are probably many arguments against establishing such a distinction between those novels; moreover, the author of this research paper may be accused of being rather subjective and judgemental in reducing *The House of Silk* to a piece of entertainment fiction while celebrating the other narratives as good examples of post-modern literature. We hope, nonetheless, that the reader will be convinced that, beyond the questions of label, homage, and legacy, the characters created by Arthur Conan Doyle remain more alive than ever, and that they are still as relevant from a 21st-century perspective than from a Victorian one.

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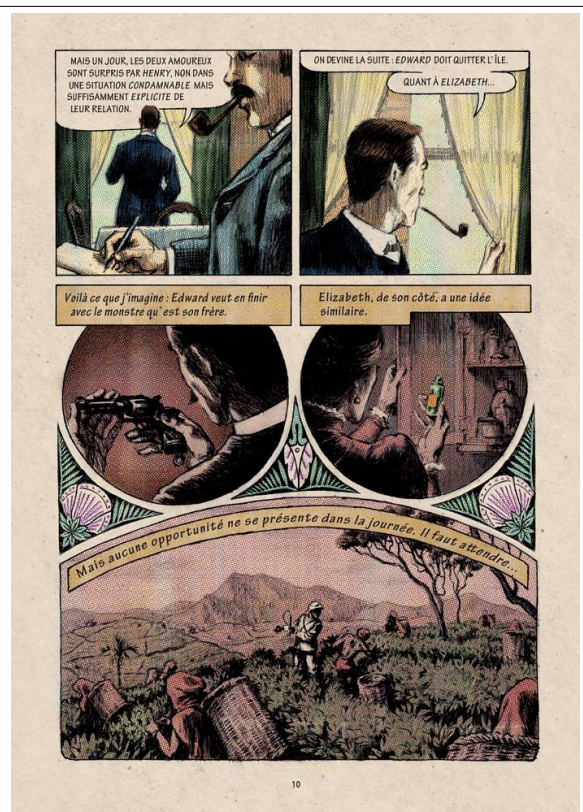
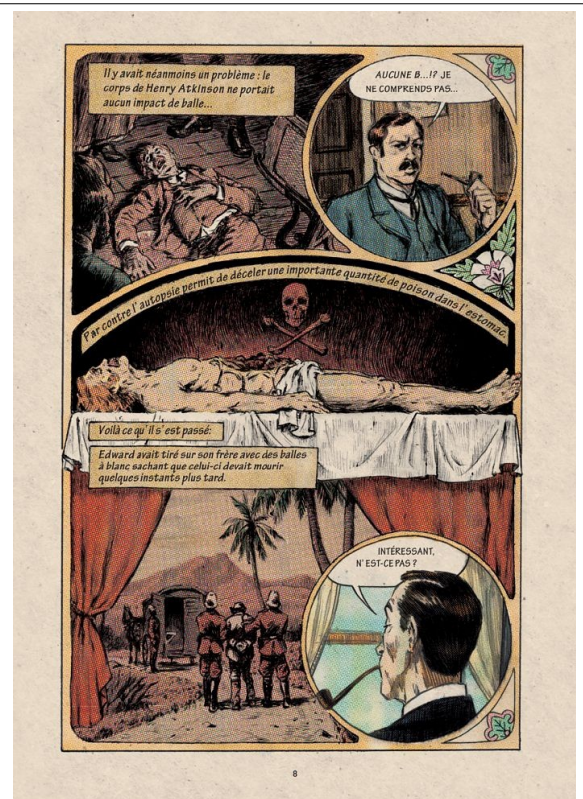
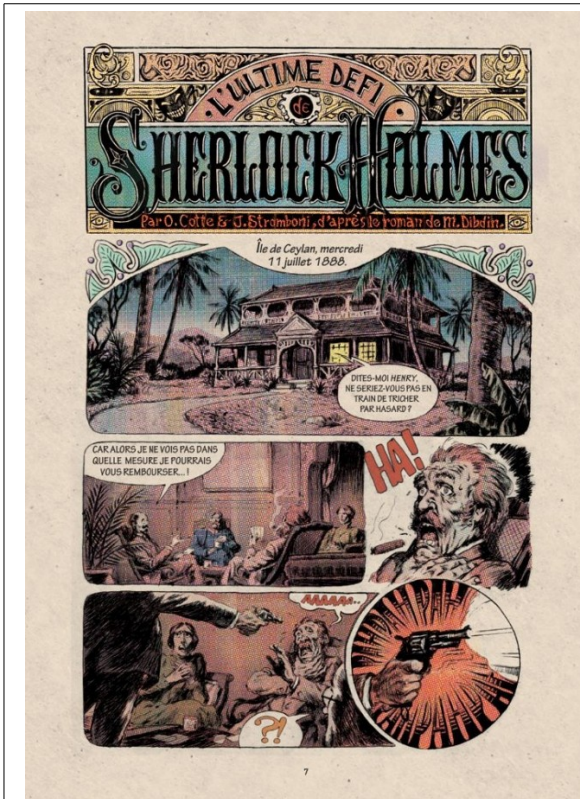
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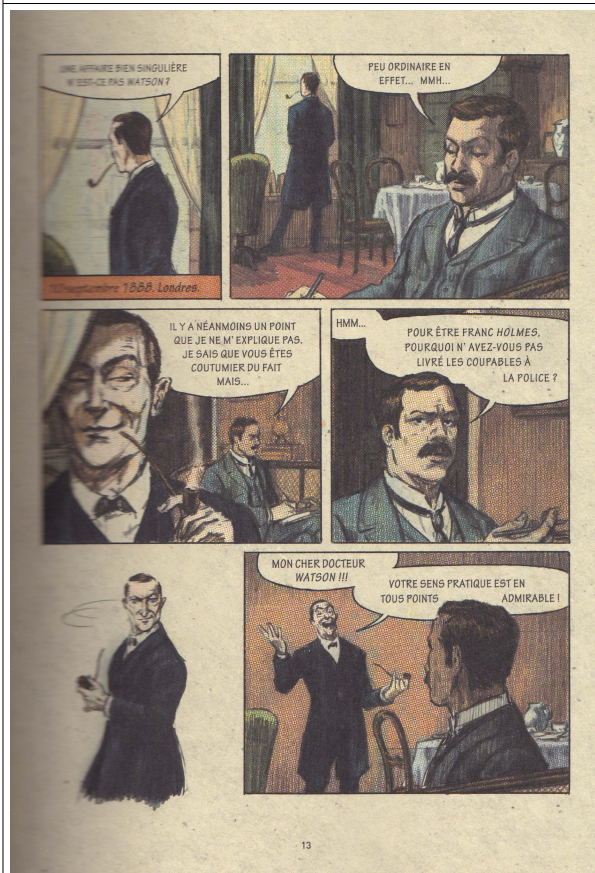
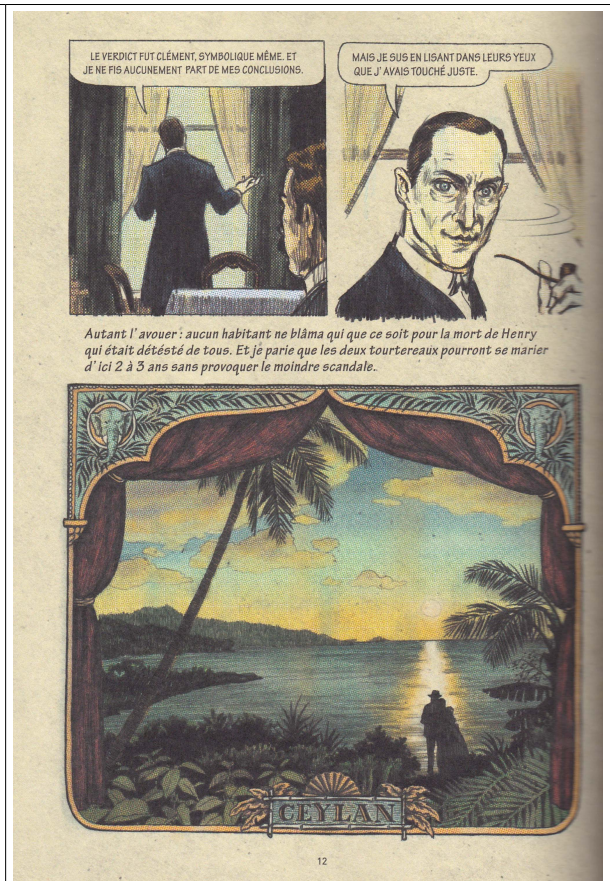
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Appendix I:

L'ultime défi de Sherlock Holmes, Michael Dibdin, Olivier Cotte & Jules Stromboni, pp. 7-14

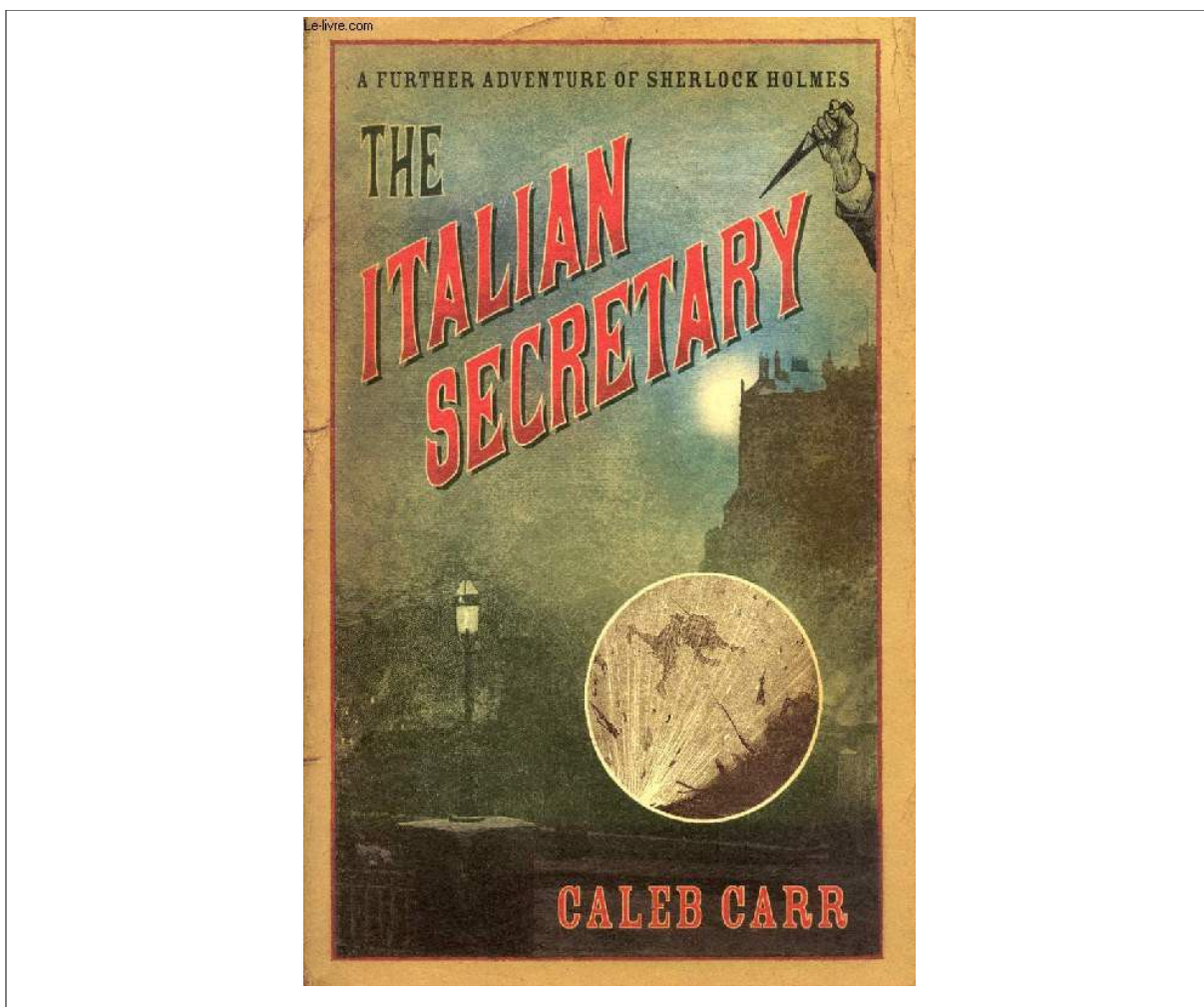




Appendix II:

The Italian Secretary, Caleb Carr

(cover to the Little Brown Books edition by Tim Bryne)



Appendix III:

L'ultime défi de Sherlock Holmes, Michael Dibdin, Olivier Cotte & Jules Stromboni

pp. 123/124





Appendix IV:

L'ultime défi de Sherlock Holmes, Michael Dibdin, Olivier Cotte & Jules Stromboni
p.17



COMMENT ?!

DANS MOINS DE 30 SECONDES, UN COCHER VA FRAPPER À LA PORTE.



AU SON DE SES PAS, JE SAIS QUE SA SEMELLE DROITE EST PLUS USÉE À CAUSE DU MARCHEPIED DE MÉTAL...



IL REVIENT DE CHEZ LE BARBIER... PORTE UNE VESTE NOIRE DONT LE BOUTON SUPÉRIEUR RISQUE DE SE DÉTACHER... SON CHIEN S'APPELLE... MUTT...

IL VIENT ÉGALEMENT DE SE GRATTER L'AVANT-BRAS GAUCHE...



HOLMES !!! C'EST ADMIRABLE !!!

UN JEU D'ENFANT DOCTEUR ! UN JEU D'ENFANT !!



J'AI REÇU UN TÉLÉGRAMME DE LESTRADE QUI NOUS ENVOIE UN FIACRE AFIN DE NOUS ENTREtenir D'UNE AFFAIRE DE LA PLUS HAUTE IMPORTANCE.



POUR LE RESTE, C'ÉTAIT UNE PLAISANTERIE, BIEN SÛR...

... COMME VOUS L'AVIEZ DEVINÉ.

TOC!
TOC!



Appendix V:

L'ultime défi de Sherlock Holmes, Michael Dibdin, Olivier Cotte & Jules Stromboni
pp. 78/79

