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Sherlock Holmes e il giallo inglese

a cura di J.M. Ivo Klaver

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Conan Doyle, Sherlock Holmes, and the Victorian Media

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The Sherlock Holmes stories are intimately connected with new, distinctively late Victorian, forms of print media. Most obviously, of course, Conan Doyle’s publication method exploited one such form – the low cost periodical, combining news articles, brief fiction, articles on celebrities, popular science, royalty, with a respectable but not high-brow audience as its target. His use of *The Strand Magazine* (published from 1891-1950) as a vehicle for Holmes narratives produced one of that journal’s most successful literary relationships. George Newnes (1851-1910), the editor and owner of *The Strand*, had on his books the most keenly read author of the new detective fiction and Sidney Paget (1860-1908) added illustrations that, where Holmes himself was concerned, defined the detective’s image for several generations. Paget’s drawings were, perhaps, the most influential contribution in graphic art to Holmes’ visual life outside the original pages in Conan Doyle’s life time. *The Strand* was, even at this level, inextricable from the ways Holmes was known as he established himself in popular culture. (The notion that Holmes has life outside the pages of Conan Doyle’s stories will not be of insignificance to my argument here.)

Arthur Conan Doyle made the most of his relationship with *The Strand*. I do not mean merely that he secured good terms, the services of a good illustrator, or advantageous arrangements from a journal editor who was also a book publisher¹. In addition, he wrote the substance of *The Strand* into his stories. Consider, for instance, the matter of visual puzzles. At the end of editions of *The Strand*, during Conan Doyle’s time, there was a section where

¹ *The Strand*, as the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* notes, sold the 300,000 copies of its first instalment in January 1891; it was presently printing half a million copies of its monthly instalments (entry on Newnes).

readers’ letters and photographs were published: it was entitled “Curiosities”, a word not foreign to Holmes’s own interests. This section – still intriguing after a century – responded to the widespread possession of affordable and easily-manageable cameras and to the oddities that they both recorded and created. The pages typically included – to take some random examples – a branch that looked like a human hand; a curiously shaped tree blasted by lightning; a photo of a dog who refused all food if offered it with the left hand; a letter typed in a strange code which was actually produced by a typewriter with the shift key out of order; a walking stick handle that looked like W. E. Gladstone, the British prime minister;² and, as a staple subject, many ‘ghost photographs’. The section privileged the odd, the unusual, the appearance of the supernatural. Such matters were all pertinent for Holmes’s stories. And the appearance of the supernatural, of course, particularly fitted the theme of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, published in *The Strand* from August 1901-April 1902. Visual puzzles hinted, at a more general level, at the kind of detecting that Conan Doyle exemplified in Holmes so that in part of an instalment readers could find themselves acting out the detective’s role. In *The Hound* for instance, Holmes solves the puzzle of Dr Mortimer’s walking stick at the beginning. And in the “Curiosities” section, the reader was invited by Newnes to puzzle over other enigmas that had nonetheless an explanation. The reader became Holmes. The origins of the detective’s methods are, certainly, to be found with the Edinburgh surgeon, Joseph Bell, and Edgar Allan Poe’s Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin: but what *The Strand* asked its readers to do on a monthly basis reveals how much Newnes’s magazine gave shape to the so-called deductive techniques of the detective as well.

Conan Doyle drew attention to the material location of his stories in that characteristic form of late Victorian print media. And he exploited – spoke to – the medium for his publications in other ways. He made, for instance, some tales quietly complicit in the capitalist business of the journal advertisement, making his adventures resonate with the commercial identity of their very location. When Dr Watson – to keep to *The Hound of the Baskervilles* – visits Mrs Lyons, she is found at her typewriter. Sidney Paget illustrated her in the midst of typing – a new profession of uncertain moral status at the turn of the century. Mrs Lyons, not wholly reputable, traded with a new stereotype³. Readers of the *Strand* would have been particularly conscious of how her representation – verbal and visual – drew attention to the medium which they were reading. Placing a woman at her Remington No 2 typewriter – Conan Doyle is careful to specify exactly what she was using – suited the pages of the modern, commercially-driven *Strand* because such typists might well be reading it. They

² All these are examples included in Appendix A of O’Gorman 2006:239-44.

³ On this subject, see Price and Thurschwell 2004, Mullin, and Rainey.

were part of the target audience, signalled by the journal's inclusion of many advertisements in each edition for the latest products. In the instalment that included the chapter in which Mrs Lyons appears at her machine, *The Strand* published, in its extensive pages of commercials, adverts for the Blickensderfer, Chicago, Siècle, Empire, Yost, and Remington typewriters, as well as Taylor's Typewriter Company shop. The connection – even with the make of machine – insisted on the contemporaneity of the Holmes stories, their link with its audience, and the medium in which it was appearing. Conan Doyle stressed that the Holmes narratives were immediately involved in the modern world, its technology, its fashionable devices, and, more widely, with the material that went, literally, to compose the substance of the popular periodical in which the adventures appeared⁴.

The Hound drew attention to other forms of new media at the level of plot, too. The neat overlapping of Conan Doyle's narrative with the matter of advertisements emphasized a relationship with the journal's commercial ambitions; other references concentrated not on the periodicals but the newspaper and underlined the fact that the story was happening in the speeded-up world of modern reportage. The murder of the Baskervilles in their remote ancestral home is not remote from the accelerated world of the circulation of news in a culture that might be said, importantly, to have invented the idea of news as we understand it today. When Mrs Lyons – again – tells Dr Watson that she did not meet Sir Charles at his gate on the night he was killed, she adds that she learned only of his death the following morning from the newspaper. But that was impossibly fast. Sir Charles's body was not discovered by Barrymore until midnight. Informing the press can hardly have been the first thing on the butler's mind in this catastrophe – but no newspaper could have brought out news received only early in the morning for publication later that morning. Perhaps this slip is meant to make the reader momentarily suspicious of Mrs Lyons – or of Barrymore – though Watson appears not to notice it. Perhaps it is merely yet another one of Conan Doyle's errors. But error though it undoubtedly is, this time problem points to an assumption in *The Hound* about the responsiveness, the speed, of the modern newspaper. The press is up-to-date; indeed, an act of fictionalizing about its rapidity serves only to express the real promptness of the propagation of news through the modern culture,

⁴ There is, I think, something of compliment, and a gentle joke, about the *Strand* in "The Resident Patient" when Conan Doyle has Dr Watson record that he and Holmes have been observing, for three hours, "the ever-changing kaleidoscope of life as it ebbs and flows through Fleet Street and the Strand" (Doyle 1981:424). Obviously, Conan Doyle is referring to the central London street – but he was also nodding to his familiar place of publication with a recognition of its liveliness to which he, of course, substantially contributed with his own tales of the "kaleidoscope of life". "The Resident Patient" was published in *The Strand* in August 1893.

even in so distant a part as the regions of Baskerville Hall.

Holmes does not want to be without such a medium. Many a story begins with the account of the crime that had appeared in the newspaper. It was the same with Dupin, who considered the tricky mess of the murder of Marie Rogêt from the newspapers and relied heavily on evidence reported in the press for solving the crime in the Rue Morgue. Holmes needs the press too: it is speedy – and seemingly dependable. When it is accurate, the work of journalists forms a foundation for his authority. His knowledge of the newspapers, as the *Hound* reminds us, is, accordingly, remarkable. Holmes recognizes the typeface of *The Times* and the language of the leader article as the place from where the warning message to Sir Henry at the beginning of the *Hound* was cut. This is no great feat, but in confessing to confusing two regional newspapers in his youth, Holmes insists, also, that he can now tell the identity not just of the nation's leading newspaper but of a host of others from across the kingdom from their appearance alone. The agony column in the daily press (such as in "The Red Circle" [1911]) or newspaper advertisements serve him as a window onto London crime – just as, in high culture, the brief news column served Marcel Proust as novels in miniature or, in working-class culture, Newnes's *Tit-Bits* offered brief anecdotes from the news as a vivid portrayal of contemporary life through narrative fragments⁵. "I read nothing except the criminal news", Holmes says, appropriately enough, in "The Adventure of the Noble Bachelor" (1892), "and the agony column. The latter is always instructive" (Doyle 1981:288). Indeed it is. The press is close to his profession: problems can be solved by putting an advert in the newspapers ("The Greek Interpreter" [1893]); and with a newspaper, Holmes can deceive a man sufficiently to bring him to justice.

However much their relationships were of different kinds, Holmes' dependence on the modern media resonates with Conan Doyle's own serviceable association with the contemporary periodical press. And on occasions, Conan Doyle writes in way that suggests even more richly the nature of those relationships and the strength of interconnection between the business of writing detective fiction at the turn of the nineteenth century and the diverse world of the modern media in its many manifestations. The best instance of this is not *The Hound*, suggestive though it is in connecting detective writing to new material forms of late Victorian print culture. Rather, the "Adventure of the Six Napoleons" (1904 – included in *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*) offers a more revealing comparison. This is, of course, the story in which Holmes is

⁵ "The Adventure of the Copper Beeches" (1892) begins with Holmes tossing aside the advertisement pages of the *Daily Telegraph* and observing that it is 'frequently in its least important and lowliest manifestations that the keenest pleasure [for the detective] is to be derived' (Doyle 1981:316).

called to explain why plaster heads of Napoleon I are being smashed in the Kensington area of London. Burglary is committed, and then murder, in the attempt to reach them. The criminal proves to be something of a cultural stereotype; Conan Doyle's regard for other nationalities than the British is, as everyone knows, not of a high order. In this case, the passionate, intemperate, and violent thief is – alas – Italian.

When murder is committed at 131 Pitt Street, Kensington, it is in a house that belongs to, significantly, a journalist. A poorly dressed sunburned man is found stabbed to death, but the unlucky house owner and news reporter – Mr Harker – is too shocked to make anything of the story. “I must try and make something of it”, he says, “though I have no doubt that the first editions of the evening papers are out already and full of details.” Unfortunately, this proves not the first instance that Mr Harker has been too involved in the news to do any writing. “It's like my luck”, he adds:

You remember when the stand fell at Doncaster? Well, I was the only journalist in the stand, and my journal the only one that had no account of it, for I was too shaken to write it. And now I'll be too late with a murder done on my own doorstep. (Doyle 1981:586)

News and news reporting are annoyingly divided by their very proximity. The velocity that Conan Doyle associates, as in *The Hound*, with the press is Harker's reprimand because, part of the free market, the journalist's world is one of competition where swift responsiveness is decisive. But the “Six Napoleons” does not merely reconfirm that the circulation of news in the modern world is rapid, or that crime is a peculiarly marketable subject for the press (a topic, naturally, which involved a certain amount of displaced interest for Conan Doyle, looking to secure an income from his relationship with another manifestation of the new media). The adventure brings into provocative visibility a major question about the challenges of Conan Doyle's own career as a writer of detective fiction.

Holmes had been made to rely on the integrity of the press in solving some of his cases. At the very least, newspaper accounts are sources of information in “The Boscombe Valley Mystery” (1891); “The Five Orange Pips” (1891); “The Adventure of the Noble Bachelor” (1892). But in the “Six Napoleons” it is the readiness of the press to believe without question the integrity of the detective which is more important – and it is ripe for exploitation. That readiness enables a solution to a crime – and also exposes the press's credulity. Holmes does not want, after the murder in Kensington, to frighten the criminal away. And neither does he want to indicate that the forces of law and order have any sense that there is a connection between the various bust-smashing incidents. What is needed, after the Pitt Street crime, is to convince the criminal

that he is safe to carry on attempting to reach the remaining Napoleons. Holmes, accordingly, feeds the newspapers an inaccurate story which, accurately, they report. "Listen to this", Holmes says to Watson, reading the consequent press account:

It is satisfactory to know that there can be no difference of opinion upon this case, since Mr Lestrade, one of the most experienced members of the official force, and Mr. Sherlock Holmes, the well-known consulting expert, have each come to the conclusion that the grotesque series of incidents, which have ended in so tragic a fashion, arise from lunacy rather than from deliberate crime. No explanation save mental aberration can cover the facts. (Doyle 1981:589-90)

This is quite untrue. But it is a necessary fiction to precipitate the next crime and, Watson and Holmes hope, the apprehending of the criminal. It works. The press assists the detective: in putting into circulation a fiction, the solution to a crime is achieved. Holmes looks up from this little deception and remarks "The Press, Watson, is a most valuable institution, if you only know how to use it" (Doyle 1981:590). Conan Doyle, of a different relationship with contemporary print culture, might have said the same.

Holmes has customarily been a user of the press in the sense that he has been a reader of it – now, in ironic counterpoint to the incapacitated Mr Harker, he is the one who writes the story. And so an act of fiction permits the prosecution of the truth. Holmes, the product of fiction, becomes the author of it; the press, customarily hailed as a source of reliable information, stands now manipulated into falsity by an external authority who is not customarily given to anything but the strictest truthfulness.

The "Six Napoleons" makes the reader think about what he or she is reading. It is a self-referential narrative in the Holmes canon, a time when the curiosity of the Holmes stories is made the subject of a story itself. Of course, readers knew they are reading fiction when enjoying Conan Doyle's detective adventures; everyone realized that he or she was reading a distinctively compelling instance of a newly emerging practice of literary writing. Yet Holmes, as Conan Doyle understood, was not easy to confine to the domain of imaginative prose and was widely regarded by a popular readership, covertly, wilfully, problematically, as at least half real. The celebrated resident of 221B Baker Street, Conan Doyle knew, regularly received letters, as he still does. More than any character in English letters, perhaps, Holmes was the one whom readers would have liked, and perhaps would still like, to think was real. That which is fictional and that not, the empirically true and the fantasy, were interwoven with special force in the reception of Conan Doyle's hero and the conflation set the terms for the reception of much other detective fiction in the succeeding century. But Holmes's troublesome reality was of a uniquely

pervasive kind, and it troubled Conan Doyle greatly. That reality was, to be sure, one of the reasons he killed Holmes off in “The Final Problem” (1893): as an author, he needed to show his readers and himself that his hero was a figure merely at the mercy of his creator.

The “Six Napoleons”, published in *Collier's Weekly*, 30 April 1904 and *The Strand Magazine*, May 1904, was a tale partly about the place of the press in the modern world. But in it, via the media, the problem of Holmes's fictionality was subtly dramatized. Holmes was made to offer the substance of a news report in a genre widely accepted – he accepts it himself – as empirically dependable. But on this occasion it is a false story that he deliberately circulates. That scene of the detective's manipulation suggests, to be sure, his controlling supremacy over the nature of knowledge in the capital, as if he were some kind of arch-censor or secular divinity. It also indicates again – as many of the stories do – how ready Holmes is to bend the truth in order to solve a crime. But the scene of Holmes-as-author-of-fiction also gently reflects back on Conan Doyle's art and his wry recognition that invention and actuality have, in the person of Holmes, lost, in the pages of the new media, more than a little of their definition. Making his detective write fiction in a form of publication supposed to be defined by its reality is an exact mirror image of Conan Doyle's stories which were fiction that had too often been mistaken for reality.

Successfully taking advantage of one element of the modern media, Conan Doyle, even if reluctantly, made the best of the new affordable periodical which catered for a less elevated readership than the more traditional journals. It was not where he wanted his career to go – but it was a profitable relationship nevertheless⁶. Yet connections between the Holmes narratives and the new media were more than this. Conan Doyle registered in many stories the power, promptness, and accuracy of what could be read in the pages of the press; he drew attention to the material form of his publications as part of the modern media itself, and he celebrated that media by insisting on his detective's dependence on the news and his necessary assumption of its accuracy. Holmes was a creature of the media, as much as he owed his existence to it. Narrating a story in “The Adventure of the Six Napoleons” where the press reported only fiction, Conan Doyle made a further point. In that adventure, what was to be found in print media and what was made up were deliberately confused, and the reader was encouraged at a subterranean level to consider the most – to his author – vexing feature of Conan Doyle's hero. In the figure of Sherlock Holmes, what was empirically real and what was the product of the imagination had been confused. Holmes, in “The Adventure of Six Napoleons”, is made silently to remind his audience that not everything to be found

⁶ The best recent account of Conan Doyle's dealings with *The Strand* is McDonald 1997.

in the pages of the extraordinary modern world of the new print culture is true. For those absorbed in the Holmes narratives which were produced, like "Six Napoleons", in the pages of a different manifestation of, nevertheless, that same rapidly changing world of Victorian print, that was a fact not every reader was good at remembering.

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