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The New Sexy: A Rhetorical Analysis of Sherlock

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Abstract

In recent history, there have been movements advocating for conversation and change regarding traditional gender roles. As a central part of culture, British television has not escaped this scrutiny. BBC's crime drama *Sherlock*, directed by Steven Moffat, has received both critical acclaim and attention from the general public for its portrayal of women. In this essay, we venture into this conversation, and explore portrayals of existing gender roles and how the writers of the show choose to dissent with the audience's expectations of gender portrayal. We examine connections between past and present portrayals of the classic character, Sherlock Holmes, and how these portrayals oppose gender stereotypes. Four methods are examined in this essay to explore the portrayal of women and gender roles in *Sherlock*. Through strategic use of narrative, the unique way in which the plot is constructed; visuals, the persuasive use of motifs and symbolism; and language, or how word choice assists the viewer in understanding the underlying assumptions of the characters and rhetors. We chose to explore issues of gender roles and how stereotypes are refuted in the episode, "A Scandal in Belgravia," because it has been the target of criticism for its portrayal of women. We conclude that the scriptwriters of *Sherlock* use rhetorical devices to challenge the audience's assumptions and to dissent against the way gender norms are typically portrayed on television. Ultimately, "A Scandal in Belgravia" breathes new life into a classic literary character, redefining gender expectations for a modern audience.

Sherlock Holmes, though a fictional character, exceeds many notable nonfiction characters in modern day esteem and interest. Holmes has been re-rendered in movie format and spin-off tales countless times over the years. Clearly, his is a tale worth repeating. The most recent British rendition has taken the fandom by storm, catapulting Holmes and Watson into current events in the modern world, and reinventing them for fans as Sherlock and John. Yet more than simply passive entertainment, *Sherlock* has become a medium conducive to examining social values. In particular, *Sherlock* presents a unique take on gender stereotypes. As a modern interpretation of classic literature, *Sherlock* offers room for exploring the real truth of gender. *Sherlock* is not about putting current biases on stereotypes of the past, but making the past relatable to a modern audience. *Sherlock* brings the values of the past into the modern day, infusing modern assumptions and experiences into the examination of both past and present value systems. Through strategic use of narrative, the unique way in which the plot is laid out; nonverbal communication, as seen through the use of visuals; narrative, which allows the story to be told in a relevant method while allowing the audience to see value systems in action; and paralanguage, the most vital aspect of verbal communication; the writers of *Sherlock* brilliantly provide audiences with a lesson on interactions between and underlying attitudes towards women and men.

As a case study of gender roles and attitudes, “A Scandal in Belgravia” perfectly allows the writers and audience to analyze and explore their own preconceived notions about gender.¹ As Sherlock vies with Irene, a dominatrix, for control, he must confront his own preconceptions about women. Irene has in her possession racy photographs, which the British royal family would like to recover. Once Sherlock meets Irene, he struggles to maintain his normally aloof composure as his feelings towards her befuddle him more and more. The Woman challenges both Sherlock’s and the audience’s schemas regarding gender.

Literature Review

Rhetorical Situation Surrounding *Sherlock*

Although he has brought the Sherlock Holmes saga into the modern era, Moffat holds

1. All future references to “A Scandal in Belgravia” are from this episode: Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss, “A Scandal in Belgravia,” *Sherlock*, season 2, episode 1, directed by Paul McGuigan, aired May 6, 2012 (Cardif, Wales, BBC Wales, 2012), DVD.

steadfastly to Arthur Conan Doyle's original concept, declaring, "we didn't take anything out. We're actually quite thorough about our Sherlock Holmes."² In fact, Moffat responds to criticisms about his approach to the project, saying that he

think[s] it's interesting to remember that Sherlock Holmes . . . [was] contemporary. They [the stories] were a very different experience for the people who first read them, than for us reading, because it was set in the world they saw outside their window. They were not period pieces. They have accidentally become one.³

In essence, Moffat is returning the stories to what they were originally: stories the audience could relate to in their everyday lives, stories *about* everyday lives, albeit with a "smarty-pants" as the main character. That was Conan Doyle's Holmes; Moffat is simply taking the experience original readers would have had with the character and translating it so that viewers today can have an equivalent experience. This is Moffat's Sherlock.

The show first aired in 2010, and was birthed when Moffat and friend and co-writer Mark Gatiss discovered a shared affinity for Sherlock Holmes stories. Both expressed a desire for someone to write a storyline in which Holmes lived in the twenty-first century, and gradually realized they were perfect for the job. Soon enough, the BBC green-lighted the production, and "the game was on."⁴

But what made *Sherlock* so popular? Perhaps the answer lies in the appeal of its genre classification. Audiences approach media with preconceived notions based on their preexisting attitudes surrounding a particular genre. Thomas Conley writes, "rhetorical genre can better be thought of as a congeries of expectations which the audience brings to the occasion."⁵ Before the opening credits roll, the audience is already creating their own attitudes and perceptions surrounding a piece of media based on the expectations they brought with them.

Sherlock's audience, too, has preconceived notions about the show based on its genre category. *Sherlock* falls under the "crime drama" genre, which has remained incredibly popular for decades. Deborah Jermyn explains, "since the earliest days of television drama, crime series

2. "Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss Interview: Sherlock," *Den of Geeks*, July 20, 2010, <http://www.denofgeek.us/tv/sherlock/20536/steven-moffat-and-mark-gatiss-interview-sherlock>.

3. Ibid.

4. A trademark phrase commonly associated with Holmes in Conan Doyle's original stories.

5. Thomas M. Conley, "Ancient Rhetoric and Modern Genre Criticism," *Communication Quarterly* 27, no.4 (1979): 47.

have maintained a regular presence in television schedules the world over, enjoying the status of a ‘banker’ genre among programmers eager to secure a loyal and sizeable audience.”⁶ Jermyn goes on to point out that the popularity of this genre goes beyond the gore and shock value commonly associated with crime, instead arguing that the crime drama’s “appeal lies in a capacity for astute psychological perceptiveness, rather than lab-work.”⁷ This sort of show does not treat the audience as unintelligent, but instead invites them in to walk alongside the protagonists as they solve a crime.

The appeal of being a participant in the show would seemingly be dampened by the darkness of the world created on-screen. Reality is anything but a safe or positive place in most crime dramas. Often, detectives or police officers solve a new grisly murder or kidnapping in every single episode. Sue Turnbull proposes, “what the TV crime drama offers us is a dystopian world.”⁸ Given the intensely dark storylines of many modern crime dramas, it is reasonable to question the cause of these shows’ popularity. Perhaps the allure of the crime drama that leads to its consistent success is rooted in the cultural enticement of the dystopia. Roger Paden explores this modern obsession with dystopian stories, and draws on the research of Judith Shklar. He explains

Judith Shklar has argued convincingly that the real cause of the death of utopia can be found in the rise of what she terms the “romanticism of defeat.” Shklar identifies this form of romanticism . . . , having been disillusioned by skepticism, but [that is also] unable to find a new home for its spiritual longing in the present or future. Hopelessly tossed back and forth between memory and yearning, it can neither accept the present nor face the new world.⁹

Given the hopelessness and tragedy so often displayed in crime dramas, Turnbull is justified in asking why the general public appears so obsessed with this genre. She hypothesizes one of the possible reasons is that the filming style of modern crime dramas are, in some ways, beautiful. For example, Turnbull explains that “*Wallander*, the series, is beautiful to look at even when what it is depicting may not be beautiful at all . . . during the course of its development the television

6. Deborah Jermyn, “Labs and Slabs: Television Crime Drama and the Quest for Forensic Realism,” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*, September 28, 2012, 1.

7. *Ibid.*, 7.

8. Sue Turnbull, “Crime as Entertainment: The Case of the TV Crime Drama,” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 24, no. 6 (2010): 822.

9. Roger Paden, “Ideology and Anti-Utopia,” *Contemporary Justice Review* 9, no. 2 (2006): 224.

crime series has been in the forefront of stylistic innovation on the small screen.”¹⁰ *Sherlock* is a visual masterpiece, even without the riveting storyline of each episode.

Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss' reinvention of Conan Doyle's classic detective story has been incredibly popular since its premiere in 2010. Airing on BBC One, *Sherlock* has been met with immense success and popularity among viewers. The season two finale, “The Reichenbach Fall”, had 7.9 million viewers.¹¹ But *Sherlock*'s success has not been confined to the United Kingdom alone. In mid-2012, the season two premiere aired on American network PBS to a viewing audience of over 3.2 million, more than double the viewership for the average PBS primetime show.¹²

Part of the reason *Sherlock* enjoys such impressive viewership is that the show's intended audience appears to be all ages. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Moffat compares *Sherlock* to his other hit show, *Doctor Who*, which enjoys a considerably sized audience of all ages, arguing that “anything can be addressed to a child audience – you just have to write it better.”¹³ Of *Doctor Who*, Moffat explains that “you just have to do it clearly and honestly and with enough integrity that children will watch it and understand it, and parents will be happy that they do so.”¹⁴ When asked if he would rather write *Sherlock* more for an adult audience due to its later airtime in the evening, Moffat replies in the negative. He explains, “writing for adults often means just increasing the swearing – but find an alternative to swearing and you've probably got a better line.”¹⁵ Moffat obviously recognizes that he is not catering to an all-adult audience, but goes out of his way to ensure that young and old alike can follow and be entertained by *Sherlock*. *Sherlock* clearly has a sizable audience, and thus has a large platform for impacting the way people think.

Gender and Equality in the United Kingdom

Despite its popularity, certain episodes of *Sherlock* seem to buck societal norms about gender. While most of the world has embraced gender equality, Great Britain takes parity even

10. *Ibid.*, 824.

11. Andrew Marszal, “Sherlock Finale Another Ratings Triumph,” *The Telegraph*, January 16, 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/9017545/Sherlock-finale-another-ratings-triumph.html>.

12. Matt Mitovich, “Ratings: Sherlock's Numbers a Mystery No More,” *TV Line*, May 7, 2012, <http://tvline.com/2012/05/07/ratings-pbs-sherlock-season-2-premiere/>.

13. Stuart Jeffries, “‘There Is a Clue Everybody's Missed': Sherlock Writer Steven Moffat Interviewed,” *The Guardian*, January 20, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/tv-and-radio/2012/jan/20/steven-moffat-sherlock-doctor-who>.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*

more seriously. The United Kingdom has instituted Equality Acts, which provide common rights to all citizens and eliminate discrimination.¹⁶ These acts were instituted over many years in the United Kingdom, going back to the Race Relations Act of 1976 and beyond, each time defending more groups and providing more rights for people who often face discrimination.¹⁷ A 2007 BBC news story reported that, in a survey of recruitment agencies, it was discovered that more than 70% had been asked to avoid hiring women of childbearing age.¹⁸ Trevor Phillips, head of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights, says of the UK: “equality is not a minority zone—the majority of the people in this country are women and disadvantaged.”¹⁹ Thus, the fact that women have expressed dissatisfaction with the portrayal of gender in media, as they perceived it to be derogatory, is unsurprising.

Within the cultural context, equality takes on an even more significant meaning. Gender equality has been granted a place of importance in conversations about culture and society in the United Kingdom. British television is a reflection of those conversations. As such, *Sherlock* has come under criticism for its portrayal of gender, most critically in “A Scandal in Belgravia.” Jane Clare Jones argued in *The Guardian*,

The woman Holmes referred to as “the woman” was remade by Moffat as a high-class dominatrix saved only from certain death by the dramatic intervention of our hero. While Conan Doyle’s original is hardly an exemplar of gender evolution, you’ve got to worry when a woman comes off worse in 2012 than in 1891.²⁰

We believe that it is important to investigate criticisms of the show, and explore whether the themes of *Sherlock* are indeed a de-evolution of gender roles. Specifically, we will seek to answer: How do rhetors reinvent classic literature through television to deconstruct and explore gender stereotypes? The first episode of *Sherlock*’s second season, “A Scandal in Belgravia,” provides an ideal text for analysis through which we can address our research question. We chose to explore issues of gender roles and stereotypes as they are portrayed in this episode because the episode has come under criticism for its portrayal of women. For this reason, we

16. “Equality Act 2010,” September 10, 2011, <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/equalities/equality-act/>.

17. Race Relations Act, 1976, c. 74. For the full document, visit <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1976/74>.

18. Mothers ‘Face Job Discrimination’, *BBC News*, February 28, 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/6402933.stm.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Jane Clare Jones, “Is Sherlock sexist? Steven Moffat’s wanton women,” *The Guardian*, January 3, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/jan/03/sherlock-sexist-steven-moffat?newsfeed=true>.

will analyze and explore these deeper issues contained within this episode through the use of four specific rhetorical tools: narrative, visuals, language, and paralanguage.

Rhetorical Devices

Just as gender roles are instigated and perpetuated in society through the way stories are told, through the visuals that are displayed, and through the language choices that are utilized, they are also displayed on television shows in the same way. Thus, in order to understand *how* these communication aspects contribute to sustaining gender roles, it is important to begin with a clear understanding of what each of these tools entails.

Narrative

Modern film and television have seen the rise of a new style of storytelling known to many as the complex narrative or puzzle plot. For decades, classical narratives have been fairly straightforward in their method of delivering a story. The audience views events in a linear narrative as they happen. Puzzle plots and complex narratives turn this clarity upside down. Warren Buckland explains, “a puzzle plot is intricate in the sense that the arrangement of events is not just complex, but complicated and perplexing; the events are not simply interwoven, but entangled.”²¹ Puzzle plots have many different strands of characters' plots that are thrown together in mind-bending combinations that are often difficult to unravel. Matthew Campora writes,

mixed-reality narratives refer to stories that feature more than one ontological level, with examples of different ontological levels including dream states, hallucinations, fantasies, psychotic episodes, lying flashbacks and embedded narratives (stories within a story, films within a film, and so on).²²

Whereas classical narratives usually alternate only between past and present, a mixed-reality narrative on the other hand adds another dimension: reality and fiction, waking and dreaming, truth and perception. The audience leaves a complex narrative experience scratching their heads in confusion, asking, "what is real?" Very seldom does this question reach resolution in their minds.

21. Warren Buckland, *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell Publishers, 2009), 3.

22. Matthew Campora, "Complex Narratives in Australian Cinema," *Metro*, no. 169 (2011), 104-105.

Visuals

Much like narrative choices, visual communication impacts how the audience interprets a series. Television shows are inherently visual communication. Visual entertainment provides a forum for persuasion, accenting certain important features through the intentional usage of color.²³ Television shows move rapidly from scene to scene and image to image, and if a discerning viewer pays attention to where the eye is being drawn, he or she can make sense, not only of the narrative plot, but also of the underlying, deeper meanings the rhetors have imbued the show with.

Language

Language is an incredibly dynamic rhetorical tool. Palczewski, Ice, and Fritch write, “theorists now see language as much more than a tool used to reference some thing in the world. People use language to construct social reality, not just refer to reality.”²⁴ When a specific word is used, it is more than a mere reflection of an unbiased history. Language does more than exist statically; it creates new realities. Renowned rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke comments “language is primarily a species of action . . . rather than an instrument of definition.”²⁵ Rhetors select language for very specific reasons. Indeed, the way a scriptwriter frames a scene linguistically always sheds light onto a deeper, overarching narrative point.

Analysis

Narrative

Sherlock is anything but a traditional crime drama laid out in linear fashion. Moffat utilizes flashbacks and non-traditional filming styles to tell a constantly moving story that is regularly jumping back and forth between reality and Sherlock's dreams and imaginings. In “A Scandal in Belgravia,” the audience not only views what is happening in reality, but is often ushered into Sherlock's dreams and recollections of crimes in the past. Because of this clever storytelling method, the audience has an intimate glimpse into how Sherlock thinks. This creative style of communicating a story is incredibly valuable in understanding how Sherlock's view of women is portrayed on screen.

In one impressive example, Moffat seamlessly cuts from a conversation between

23. Jonathan Silverman and Dean Raider, *The World is a Text* (Glenview, IL: Pearson Education, Inc., 2012), 456.

24. Catherine Helen Palczewski, Richard Ice, and John Fritch, *Rhetoric in Civic Life* (State College, PA: Strata Publishing, Inc. 2012), 36.

25. Kenneth Burke, “Dramatism,” in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, vol. 7, ed. David L. Sills, 445-452 (New York: Macmillan and Free Press, 1968), 447.

Sherlock and Irene Adler in her home to a freeze-frame of a previous crime. The scene is frozen in place at the time of the victim's death, and conveys to the audience Sherlock's memories and thoughts regarding the crime. Sherlock invites The Woman into this sacred place, his mind. Now she has not only obtained observer status to his genius, a right given to a precious few, but she is now also actually participating in his mental activities. The Woman is unique enough to be invited by Sherlock into his mind and memories about the crime. This elevated status puts her above anyone Sherlock has ever come into contact with.

Perhaps even more revealing than the mental crime scene is the sequence after Irene drugs Sherlock. Sherlock falls into a surreal, dreamlike state and the first person on his mind in his drugged stupor is none other than The Woman. In his dream, Irene pulls him back into the crime scene and proceeds to explain to him precisely how the crime took place. The lines between dream and reality are endlessly blurred, and continue to merge as Sherlock, rather than departing the scene, merely falls from the field back onto his bed as his room materializes around him. Irene is suddenly there once more, speaking to him in his delirium. The audience is left to wonder if she is really there or if she is only a figment of Sherlock's imagination. Is it that he cannot stop thinking about this dangerously intriguing woman?

By inviting the audience into Sherlock's imaginations, Moffat reveals where his protagonist's thoughts are truly directed. This is in direct contrast to a statement Sherlock makes at the beginning of the episode, when he initially turns down the Irene Adler case by saying "you know I don't concern myself with trivia." Sherlock is fundamentally saying that this woman is not interesting enough for him. Sherlock's mind betrays his preoccupation with this mysterious woman, who is important enough for him to "waste" precious mental abilities thinking about. Irene is much more than "trivia" in Sherlock's mind.

Visuals

Gender roles are also both perpetuated and challenged visually in media. "A Scandal in Belgravia" contains visual symbols, especially in regards to color, women, and nudity. The most obvious visual characteristic of the show is its neutral palette. Thus, any splash of color is startling. This episode is thoroughly laced with the color red. Red is commonly known to symbolize passion, and the most obvious presence of red is on Irene Adler. She wears red nail polish, red lipstick, red clothing, and leaves Sherlock a red Christmas gift.

Not only does color carry specific meaning, but the writers use visuals to subtly convey

to the audience that Sherlock's treatment of women is not exactly what it seems to be. The show begins with Sherlock acting as he typically does towards women. Mrs. Hudson is shown cleaning up their apartment, a task she, as their landlady and not their housekeeper, should not be doing but is expected to complete. But as the show progresses, Sherlock slowly alters his behavior. For example, after insulting Molly, he realizes she often acts in her strange, erratic way because of her crush on him. As an apology, he gently kisses her on the cheek, surprising everyone watching. It would seem that his behavior is changing because Irene is changing his opinion of women. However, this explanation is too simplistic. Instead, it makes far more sense that the writers used this episode as a case study for Sherlock's attitude towards women.

Rather than being a male supremacist, as is often thought, he actually deliberately disentangles himself from women because of their more emotional nature. Rather than scorning them, he simply chooses a life based on logic. He knows that allowing himself to become too closely attached to any woman would cloud his clear logic, as sentiment, as he puts it, is a weakness. Yet he is not as coldly calculating as one would think. When Mrs. Hudson is held hostage, Sherlock makes deductions about how she was dragged away, based on the fingernail markings on the wall. He pictures her calling his name in desperation. Sherlock could have imagined Mrs. Hudson simply calling, "Help!" or crying out John's name instead. His interpretation of Mrs. Hudson's actions is here demonstrating that he does have affection for her, and cares for her far more than he admits. His refusal to verbally announce his affection is an attempt to protect himself and his logical mind. Soon after this event, Irene resumes texting him, asking questions and waiting for a reply. Sherlock never responds to her texts, until one evening when he flips the roles and sends her a text. This sudden reversal again signifies a deeper level of emotion than the audience had seen in Sherlock previously. Irene has triumphed over Sherlock because she has broken his protective shell.

Irene and Sherlock exhibit many similarities. Their parallels are vitally important, because it explains why Sherlock eventually surrenders to her, allowing her to force his emotions, or sentiments, out into the open. Near the beginning of the episode, both Sherlock and Irene use nudity for its shock factor. When Sherlock is summoned to Buckingham Palace, he arrives wearing nothing but a sheet. He does this to prove to Mycroft, his older brother, he will not submit to the will of others. When Irene meets Sherlock for the first time, she also uses nudity to shock, appearing in the doorway completely naked. She analyzes Sherlock's detached

response to her stunt, as he is flustered but not obviously interested in her. However, it seems that Sherlock was not as disengaged as he let on, as he took enough notice of her body to memorize her measurements. Both Sherlock and Irene use their bodies as tools for making statements about their autonomy.

It is ultimately Irene's victory when, after her disappearance, Sherlock practically begs to keep her cell phone. When John talks to Sherlock, Sherlock rarely makes eye contact, instead staring off into the distance. After Irene's disappearance, the only topic that will make Sherlock look up from his microscope is Irene. When John mentions her, Sherlock's head snaps up, eagerly awaiting information. While Sherlock did manage to intellectually beat Irene, his defeat is proven when he appears in the final scene to rescue Irene. If he were as logical as he said, he would have let her die. However, Sherlock had affection for her, and therefore chose to let his emotions guide his decision to seek her out and rescue her from execution. This conclusion is actively deconstructing gender expectations, as the audience expects Sherlock to win.

Language

Moffat and Gatis are also overt in their deconstruction of gender roles, using specific language choices to influence the audience's thoughts. While all language is symbolic, "A Scandal in Belgravia" contains language that is meant to convey double meanings. In essence, there are code words embedded in the dialogue. The first code word is *heart*. Moriarty, the villain of the show, whispers menacingly to Sherlock, "I will burn the *heart* out of you." Moriarty is implying that he will target Sherlock at the very core of what he cherishes most. Later, when Sherlock is called in as a consulting detective, his brother Mycroft summons him to Buckingham Palace. Once Sherlock arrives, Mycroft comments that they are sitting in "the very *heart* of the British Nation." When John is approached by an attractive stranger and asked if he has any plans for celebrating the New Year, John answers, "Nothing I couldn't *heartlessly* abandon." This emphasis on the word *heart* points the audience's attention to Sherlock's unending focus on logic in disregard to his heart, or emotions. As Sherlock tells Irene, "this is your *heart*, and you should never let it rule your head. . . . I've always assumed that love is a disadvantage. Thank you for the final proof." Irene's love for Sherlock ultimately led to her capture.

Finally, physicality is emphasized throughout the episode, both visually and verbally. Moriarty begins the episode by threatening someone over the phone: "[if you mess up

the plan] I will find you and I will *skin* you.” The audience later finds out that the person on the phone was, in fact, Irene herself. This reference to skin is foreshadowing. Both Sherlock and Irene waltz around naked in order to make a point. Lestrade, the police inspector, warns another detective, “try not to punch him [Sherlock] in the face.” Of course, John does wind up punching Sherlock shortly after, this time because Sherlock explicitly asked for it. These are both references to the particular kind of services Irene provides for her clients. Sherlock is overtly asking for pain. Thus, he is already aligned mentally with Irene.

Throughout the show, Sherlock’s treatment of women is questionable. “A Scandal in Belgravia” provides more instances than most episodes for an examination of Sherlock’s motives. Molly, a woman who works in the lab that Sherlock uses, remains an object of his contempt. When she arrives at the Christmas party, Sherlock whispers, “Oh, no.” At the same Christmas party, Sherlock struggles to remember the name of John’s newest girlfriend. Both of these instances are contrived to portray Sherlock as a bit of a male supremacist. However, he does treat Mrs. Hudson with respect. His treatment of her in this episode is a bit of a surprise to regular audience members, as he normally treats Mrs. Hudson with mild disdain. When Mycroft tells her to shut up, both John and Sherlock shout, “Mycroft!” in very stern voices. However, briefly after Mycroft ashamedly apologizes, Sherlock comments to Mrs. Hudson, “do, in fact, shut up.” This is more reminiscent of Sherlock’s usual conduct. Still, Sherlock demonstrates affection when Mrs. Hudson is held hostage by thugs. Most surprisingly, Sherlock chides John for suggesting Mrs. Hudson leave, saying, “Mrs. Hudson leave Baker Street? England would fall.”

The most important function language serves in this episode is in demonstrating that Irene has beaten Sherlock after all. Sherlock has always had a massive ego, and he enjoys having other people notice when he does something amazing. Irene certainly notices Sherlock’s intellect. She strokes his ego repeatedly, making comments such as, “you got that [the answer] from one look? Definitely the new sexy.” However, Sherlock is wary of tying himself up with emotions. As we previously noted, he consistently chooses to avoid women in order to protect his logical skills. This explains his treatment of the other women in his life, but his steadfast distaste for women is challenged by Irene. In fact, Irene is the first to notice that Sherlock is not as oblivious to sex as everyone seems to think. Earlier in the episode, Mycroft patronizes Sherlock, implying that sex makes him nervous. Irene initially agrees with this assumption when

Sherlock deliberately looked away from her naked body and appeared nervous. However, Irene quickly amends her assumptions, saying “I was wrong. He did know where to look,” when Sherlock was able to figure out her measurements and crack her safe using the measurements as the key. She knows that Sherlock treats her differently because she asks, “does that make me special?”

Sherlock does manage to figure out the puzzle, taking Irene down in the process. He tells her, “sentiment is a chemical defect found in the losing side,” reiterating his distaste for and distrust of emotions. Sentiment is not something he wants to be accused of having, and this is why he heartlessly abandons Irene. And yet, in the end he chooses sentiment by rescuing her just as she is about to be executed. He had lost the emotional battle; he cared for Irene, and she had thus triumphed over him. Irene’s rescue, though, remained a secret unbeknownst to those closest to Sherlock. John informs Mycroft that Sherlock “won’t even call her by name. Just ‘The Woman.’” Mycroft, unfazed, astutely replies, “is that loathing or a salute? The one woman who matters.” Or, the one woman who beat Sherlock. Sherlock’s defeat is solidified when he tells John, “I will have the camera phone.” This phone was Irene’s entire life, and it was also the way she communicated with Sherlock. Sherlock wanted to keep it in memory of her, the ultimate evidence of sentiment. His near begging for it proves that Irene did beat Sherlock, after all. All of Sherlock’s pretensions, all of his perceived mistreatment of women, were really a protective device for Sherlock. He knows that women are clever. His extreme avoidance of women is a defensive move designed to protect himself from sentiment.

Conclusion

British television exists within a context of continued movements for gender equality. Steven Moffat has a motive for everything he writes. While *Sherlock* is ultimately an outlet for pent-up creativity, Moffat also uses the show to make a point. In “A Scandal in Belgravia,” any seemingly anti-women sentiments are only surface-level, while in reality the episode is dripping with deeper meaning. In fact, Moffat is remaining true to the original Doyle novels, declaring against popular notion, that “there’s no indication that [Sherlock] was asexual or gay. He actually says he declines the attention of women because he doesn’t want the distraction . . . He wouldn’t be living with a man if men were interesting.”²⁶ Furthermore, Moffat finds that, “it’s someone

26. Jeffries, “‘There Is a Clue Everybody’s Missed.’”

who abstains that's interesting,"²⁷ indicating that he finds Sherlock's insistence on refusing to intermingle with women fascinating, viewing it as something to be explored. And explore he does indeed, dedicating an entire episode to the investigation of Sherlock's interactions with the opposite sex. Here he reinvents Doyle's text, taking creative liberty in order to analyze Sherlock's interactions with women. In fact, Moffat criticizes Doyle's original Adler tale, saying that "Irene Adler's victory over Sherlock Holmes was to move house and run away with her husband. That's not a feminist victory."²⁸ He affirms his own take on the story, proclaiming that this time, "Irene wins . . . [when] Sherlock turns up to save her life at the end."²⁹ Irene Adler defies Sherlock's preconceived stereotypes about women, which typically portray them as merely emotional creatures not on par with his intellect. In contrast, Irene is a perfect blend of unbridled emotion and sheer intellectual genius, thus personifying an exquisite hybrid of both beauty and brains. Contrary to Sherlock's notions, in order for her to be portrayed as his equal, Irene does not have to inhabit the role of a man; she is still beautiful and alluring and emotional. She still retains these innately beautiful qualities of femininity, but also possesses incredible reasoning and strategizing skills.

"A Scandal in Belgravia" is an exposé on the idea that men are superior to women. Sir Conan Doyle himself defied this idea by featuring a woman so prominently in his stories, a move that in his day was very counter-cultural. Steven Moffat takes this idea to the next level and translates it for modern audiences. When *The Woman* contends with one of the most brilliant minds in modern literature and media, she excels. Sherlock's rescue of Irene proved his deep level of admiration for and respect of her. Ultimately, "A Scandal in Belgravia" breathes new life into a classic literary character, redefining gender expectations for a modern audience.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.