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The Empire Bites Back: Sherlock Holmes as an Imperial Immune System

Abstract

Trained as a physician in the bacteriological age, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle created a detective-hero who acts both like a masterful bacteriologist and an imperial immune system. Doyle's experiences as a doctor in South Africa taught him that the colonies' microbes were his Empire's worst enemy. In 1890, Doyle visited Berlin, where Robert Koch was testing a "cure" for tuberculosis, and in Doyle's subsequent character sketch of Koch, the scientist sounds remarkably like Sherlock Holmes. Based on Doyle's medical instructor Joe Bell, Holmes shares Koch's relentless drive to hunt down and unmask tiny invaders. Imperialism, by the 1880s, had opened Europe to the peoples, cultures, and diseases of the lands it claimed. Holmes plays a defensive role, as an imperial intelligence network to detect foreigners "passing" in British society. The revenge, blackmail, and counterfeiting around which the Holmes stories are built reflect readers' anxieties about infiltration, about punishment for their colonial theft, and about the legitimacy of their own identity in a socio-economic system built on contradictions. Holmes thus responds to conflicting social demands, exposing interlopers who mimic traditional signs of respectability, and protecting "respectable" citizens from the consequences of their colonial crimes.

Keywords

bacteriological age, physician, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, detective-hero, bacteriologist, imperial immune system, doctor, South Africa, colony, microbes, Empire, British Empire, Robert Koch, tuberculosis, cure, Sherlock Holmes, Joe Bell, Imperialism, cultures, disease, foreigners, passing, British society, revenge, blackmail, counterfeiting, Holmes stories, anxieties, infiltration, colonial theft, theft, legitimacy, identity, socio-economic system, colonial crimes

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Although he is apparently dying, Sherlock Holmes lets out a terrible yell as he sees Watson reaching for a small ivory box on his mantelpiece. The box, a “neat little thing,” is a biological weapon, rigged by the planter Culverton Smith so that a “sharp spring like a viper’s tooth emerges as you open it” (2:389, 399).¹ It then infects the unsuspecting Englishman with a deadly tropical disease, the “tooth” having been coated with bacteria from Sumatra. Smith, an amateur bacteriologist, compares himself to Holmes: “He is an amateur of crime, as I am of disease. For him the villain, for me the microbe. There are my prisons. Among those gelatine cultivations some of the very worst offenders in the world are now doing time” (2:393). He detects and controls the activities of bacteria, that is, just as Holmes detects and controls the activities of criminals.

Smith’s box in “The Adventure of the Dying Detective” (1917) recalls another all-important box much earlier in the Holmes adventures. In *The Sign of Four* (1891), the Agra Treasure is housed in an exotic box fastened with a Buddha hasp. Watson reports, “under this I thrust the end of the poker and twisted it outward as a lever,” thus reenacting the imperial rape of a feminized East (1:183). Smith’s murder weapon avenges this rape, for the phallic bite of the box and its deadly microbes now threaten the imperialists in their capital. Doyle’s representation of Smith’s biological warfare expresses well the readers’ simultaneous guilt and fear over colonial activities, a fear that colonials would someday violate and infect them as they had infected their colonies (Arata 623). How much sharper than a serpent’s tooth is an ungrateful child.

The angry imperial “children,” of course, are not acting on their own; instead, the scenario is much worse: a disgruntled Englishman has taken possession of their resources to murder his own people. Sherlock Holmes, who uncovers both foreign invaders and the discontented imperial subjects who collaborate with them, thus fulfills an imperial fantasy. With limitless energy and intelligence, he defends the heart of his Empire against the germs that must inevitably reach it from the foreign lands it seeks to control.

Imperialism, the product of European aggression, had rendered Europe porous. The new science of bacteriology in the 1880s was inseparable not only from the desire to conquer new territory since tropical diseases did far more to check the progress of Empire-builders than African or Asian natives ever could but from the fear that natives of these lands, in a quest for revenge, would ultimately infiltrate and infect the imperial “nerve centers.”² As the blank spaces on maps rapidly disappeared, the laboratory provided a new realm for conquest where imperial heroes could unveil, one by one, the microbes that caused many infectious diseases. Increasingly, however, the Europeans viewed the maintenance of Empires as a defensive rather than an aggressive strategy (Brantlinger 230). To protect their original borders against invasion, the Europeans fought at their newer, outermost ones. The very process of expansion, however, left them vulnerable to the new germs, mates, and ideas that their soldiers would bring home with them. The Empires needed immune systems.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930), an enthusiastic supporter of the British Empire, brought to life the fantasy of a national immune system through his character Sherlock Holmes. The Holmes stories in *His Last Bow* (1917) and *The Case Book of Sherlock Holmes* (1927), written after Doyle’s own experiences with bacteria in the Boer War, depict with disturbing clarity the potential destruction that undetected foreign and domestic malefactors might bring about in British society.³ Doyle, trained as a physician from 1876 to 1881, learned and practiced medicine during the heyday of bacteriology. The British loved Holmes for the same reasons that *fin-de-siècle* Europeans admired scientists like Robert Koch and Louis Pasteur: he devoted all of his formidable mental powers to identifying and neutralizing living threats to society.⁴ Holmes, who specializes in uncovering and identifying criminals—although not always bringing them to justice—represents a new medical and social outlook (Rothfield 132-34). More like a modern bacteriologist

than a traditional doctor, he makes it his business to scrutinize relentlessly all individuals on all social levels for the good of imperial society.

Robert Koch (1843-1910), who discovered the bacteria that caused tuberculosis (1882) and cholera (1884), and who was once described by a colleague as “he who unveiled the secret life of the anthrax bacillus,” epitomized this modern view (Koch 315). In the fall of 1890, when Doyle visited the wards in Berlin where Koch’s “cure” for tuberculosis was being tested, he described Koch for British readers in much the same terms he applied to his beloved detective: “somewhere within [those walls] the great master mind is working, which is rapidly bringing under subjection those unruly tribes of deadly micro-organisms which are the last creatures in the organic world to submit to the sway of man. . . . [Koch] preserves his whole energy for the all-important mission to which he has devoted himself” (“Dr. Koch” 552). The description presents Koch as a redeeming or civilizing force, praising his activity in much the same terms with which Europeans praised their soldiers and missionaries in Africa. For Doyle, bacteriology is an imperialistic battle fought on the home front.

Holmes fights this battle much as Koch did, by unmasking tiny interlopers who have invaded the imperial city.⁵ Rather than a higher power controlling the conditions in a laboratory, however, Holmes acts more as an imperial leucocyte or antibody, sticking closely to the infiltrators he detects. “I love to come to close grips with my man,” he confesses. “I like to meet him eye to eye and read for myself the stuff that he is made of” (2:468). “Experts” conclude prematurely in 1892 that Holmes and Moriarty go over the Reichenbach Falls “locked in each other’s arms” (1:658).⁶ Also like the human immune system, Holmes responds not always to invasive foreign particles directly, but to foreign particles surrounded by cells in distress, always marked “self.”⁷

Any immune system relies absolutely upon signals identifying elements as “self” and “other,” and Holmes’s cases frequently involve either blackmail or counterfeiting, two crimes that threaten to destabilize the traditional sign systems in British society by which worth and identity are established (Ginzburg 104-06). All too often, a “respectable” gentleman who won his fortune in the colonies by questionable means calls in Holmes to preserve his reputation when an old acquaintance he would rather forget tracks him down. Although he reveals sources of wealth the late Victorians would

rather not contemplate, Holmes appeases readers by releasing the tainted upstanding citizens, leaving them to the lashings of their own consciences. Instead, the blackmailer, generally a member of the lower classes, becomes the criminal. This pattern, of course, does not always hold true, but Holmes's calling consists largely of detecting foreign thieves, tyrants, intelligence agents, counterfeiters, women, drugs, and diseases that have worked their way into British society. "You are a benefactor of the race," Watson tells him in "The Red-Headed League" (1:251). When one reads Doyle's twentieth-century Holmes stories from a medical perspective, bearing in mind the author's own hideous medical experiences with foreign bacteria in the Boer War, one gains a new understanding of the detective's social role. Holmes serves his "race" by trying to uphold a system which established identity and economic worth through heredity, even as his clients draw their wealth from other races in other lands. In the age of imperialism, it is a losing battle.

Disease as an Imperial Threat

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle won his knighthood for using his medical training to serve the British Empire. A large, vigorous man from a family of intellectuals and artists, Doyle loved sports and any sort of challenging adventure and entered medicine primarily as a way to make a living (Carr 18). Doyle struggled at first, serving as a nominal surgeon on an arctic whaler and then, after taking his degree at the University of Edinburgh in 1881, as a full-fledged ship's surgeon on a cargo and passenger liner to the west coast of Africa. The latter voyage, on which he caught African fever, was nearly eaten by a shark, and survived a fire on board (the cargo was oil), dampened his desire for African exploration (Carr 29). He entered briefly into partnership with a friend in Plymouth who proved to be a charlatan, and then lived in poverty as he set himself up in private practice, treating a grocer's fits in exchange for butter and tea and performing medical exams for a life insurance company (Carr 37-39). Doyle survived as a general practitioner, writing his first Holmes stories between consultations, but retained his longing for travel and adventure. His trip to Berlin in November 1890 to investigate Koch's cure resulted more from this desire to explore the frontiers of medicine than from a special interest in tuberculosis (Carr 61). In 1893, shortly after Doyle had sent Holmes and Moriarty over the Reichenbach Falls, Doyle's wife Touie would develop

tuberculosis and be given only a few months to live. She surprised everyone by struggling on, as an invalid, for thirteen years, and Doyle witnessed firsthand what Koch's bacillus could do to a human body.

The fight against bacteria, the most pressing medical issue of the day, thus played a central role in Doyle's medical experiences from 1876 to 1900, creating a perspective that is evident in all of the Holmes stories.⁸ Doyle revealed in 1892, in fact, that he had based Holmes on a doctor, his professor of clinical surgery at the University of Edinburgh in 1878, Dr. Joseph Bell.⁹ Bell awed students with his ability to determine a patient's profession, origin, and ailment through close observation and deduction. Like Holmes, for instance, he could infer how a patient had reached his clinic by looking at the mud on the man's boots, and he urged students to "use your ears, use your brain, your bump of perception, and use your powers of deduction" (Liebow 132). Bell, like his student Doyle, greatly respected and closely followed developments in bacteriological research. In his obituary of his father, Bell's son wrote that the professor had "combin[ed] the practical and theoretical teachings of the older men with the minute and microscopic research of the more recent" (Liebow 148). According to Bell, "The greatest stride that has been made of late years in preventive and diagnostic medicine consists in the recognition and differentiation by bacteriological research of those minute organisms that disseminate cholera and fever, tubercle and anthrax. The importance of the infinitely little is incalculable" (Rothfield 142). In his 1892 introduction to *A Study in Scarlet*, Bell depicted vividly for readers the dangers of bacteria, again suggesting a link between the new science of bacteriology and Holmes's science of deduction: "Poison a well at Mecca with the cholera bacillus, and the holy water which the pilgrims carry off in their bottles will infect a continent, and the rags of the victims of the plague will terrify every seaport in Christendom" (Liebow 177-78). In mentioning contaminated water supplies and unwary pilgrims, Bell invokes Koch's discoveries about cholera in India eight years earlier. It is interesting, however, that in his hypothetical germ warfare he envisions infection in the Islamic Holy City, disseminated by Muslims, a genocidal fantasy in which the biological weapon returns to infect Christians. Holmes's keen eye for details thus developed out of the eye of the medical diagnostician and bacteriologist, and the affinity is evident throughout his cases.

Although Doyle never met Koch or entered the laboratory where the cure was being prepared, he did examine many of the patients being treated with it and in his character sketch of Koch in *The Review of Reviews* provides a competent and vivid picture of the experiments underway in Berlin. At the head of Doyle's character sketch, the bacteriologist, depicted as St. George and mounted on a steed labeled "investigation," brandishes a microscope at a threatening (but diminutive) dragon labeled "tuberculosis bacillus." The German artist had conceived of Koch's microscopic vision as the deadliest weapon of the imperial knight, and the British editors of *The Review of Reviews*, finding the representation appropriate, took the drawing directly from the Berlin *Ulk*.

Holmes, like his creator an imperial knight and physician-warrior who serves his Empire through his enhanced vision, consistently voices and legitimizes its ideology. "What is the use of having powers, Doctor, when one has no field upon which to exert them?" he asks Watson (1:113).¹⁰ Watson, horrified by Holmes's cocaine use, tells him he risks "the loss of those great powers," implying that he does his society a disservice by failing to maintain his mind and body. When describing Koch as a country doctor, Doyle uses the same words. Perhaps recalling his own frustrating early days as a physician, he calls Koch "strong and vigorous, with all his great powers striving for an outlet . . . he was a man of too strong a character to allow himself to be warped by the position in which he found himself" ("Dr. Koch" 552-53). Doyle, a Liberal Imperialist, presented the minds of his fictional hero and Germany's scientific one as imperial resources to be used to defend their respective realms.

Always ready to defend his Empire and longing to write the history of a contemporary war, Doyle finally found the opportunity in early 1900. Believing that the Boer War "was a righteous war and well worth sacrifices," he attempted to enlist. Rejected as a soldier because he was 41, he signed on as a doctor and took command of a hospital (Carr 124-30). The chief enemy Doyle faced in South Africa was not the irate Dutch farmers but local disease. In an intelligent strategic move, the Boers had immediately seized the Bloemfontein waterworks, waging a kind of biological warfare since the British troops were then forced to drink unpurified water and fell victim to enteric fever (Carr 130). In a letter to the *British Medical Journal*, Doyle wrote that "I know of no instance of such an epidemic in modern warfare," reporting that in one month 10,000

to 12,000 soldiers were stricken with the disease. At the Bloemfontein hospital alone, 600 died in one month and on one occasion 40 in one day (*Letters* 61). Doyle, furthermore, was aware that “foreign” diseases could decimate Africans as well as Europeans, writing in *The Great Boer War* that “the diseases which follow the white man had in Africa, as in America and Australia, been fatal to the natives, and an epidemic of smallpox cleared the country for the newcomers” (3).

Fully aware of what foreign diseases could do to human invaders, Doyle saw that bacteria, like the imperialists themselves, could wage their own invasions to which no country was naturally immune (Arata 623). England might well become their next colony. Devoted to his nation’s own imperialistic practices, however, Doyle defended the British troops against charges of rape, farm-burning, and the herding of Boer women and children into disease-ridden concentration camps. He wrote in 1902 in *The War in South Africa: Its Cause and Conduct* that the British camps, constructed to feed and care for women and children, were not infested with typhus due to poor sanitary conditions. Instead, he blamed mothers for the whooping cough, measles, and chicken pox of their children because they failed to air their tents and sponge their children properly, and because they preferred home remedies to the official ones offered by the British army (Carr 156-57). He received his knighthood for his medical service and for his effort to publish a true account of the war.

Doyle’s medical knowledge, which reminded him constantly that invisible enemies were the most deadly, gave him special insight into military maneuvers, and for years he annoyed commanders with his insistence that covert tactics would work best.¹¹ In writing a history of the Boers, he consistently praised them for their “art of taking cover” and their “extraordinary ingenuity in adapting their tactics to their adversary,” techniques central to Holmes’s methodology (*The Great Boer War* 12, 6). Observing army maneuvers in a mock battle at Salisbury in 1898, Doyle expressed concern to the staff officer: “Suppose, in a real battle, the enemy took cover and we didn’t?” The irritated officer replied that “there is altogether too much talk about cover” and that to occupy a new position, “we must not be afraid of a certain margin of loss” (Carr 109). When they went into battle with the Boers, whose pride did not prevent them from digging trenches and crouching behind rocks, the British troops were repeatedly slaughtered by invisible guns.

Doyle personally witnessed the ravages of an unseen enemy when he traveled to the front while on leave. Even after they were supposedly defeated, the Boers, more advanced than their conquerors in the tactics of modern warfare, sabotaged railways and cut telegraph wires (Carr 123-26, 150). In 1900, the British army conceded that concealment represented a major tactical advantage and specified that in future fighting, guns must be hidden and the infantry must dig trenches (Carr 133). Admiring the Boers' practicality and ingenuity, Doyle saw that any force sworn to protect the Empire must be able, first, to visualize and uncover the enemy's covert maneuvers, and second, to imitate them and employ them for its own purposes. A modern scientist and tactician, Holmes performs both of these defensive roles.

While all of Doyle's stories abound with threats to the imperial body, two written after the Boer War deal directly with foreign germs. In "The Adventure of the Blanched Soldier" (1927), an "illustrious family" sequesters its son because he has apparently been corrupted by a foreign disease. The case, narrated by Holmes, is set "in January, 1903, just after the conclusion of the Boer War." James Dodd, "a big, fresh, sunburned, upstanding Briton," seeks Holmes's help, fearing that his military "mate" is being held against his will (2:486). Dodd remarks that young Godfrey was "easily influenced by those around him" leaving him and his family dangerously open to outside forces (2:491). Sure enough, when Dodd glimpses Godfrey while staying overnight at his house, a "ghastly face glimmering as white as cheese in the darkness," the young heir does seem to be possessed by some insidious foreign force: "something slinking, something furtive, something guilty—something very unlike the frank, manly lad that I had known" (2:492). The young man's disease plays on the readers' fears in many senses. The "slinking and furtive" invader, which suggests both the Boers' military tactics and an evil, feminized foreign presence, threatens to undermine the Empire's manhood by slipping into the young heirs of its prominent families. Godfrey has not "caught" a disease; the foreign disease has caught him.

Godfrey's father, defending the privacy so sacred to the British upper classes, tells his son's mate that "every family has its own inner knowledge and its own motives, which cannot always be made clear to outsiders" (2:490). Holmes, who violates this traditional value in order to preserve his society, suspects either crime, madness or disease and sets about eliminating the alternatives,

one by one. The young soldier, it turns out, wounded and lost in the darkness after a skirmish, had stumbled into a building where he spent the night, only to be told, “you are in far greater danger here than ever you were on the battlefield. You are in the Leper Hospital, and you have slept in a leper’s bed” (2:500). Here, once again, Doyle presents the Boers’ military tactics, South Africa’s bacteria, and much murkier notions of invasive, exotic forces as parallel, perhaps analogous threats. The disease he has caught “in bed” suggests fears of venereal diseases spread by foreign and lower-class women, which likewise endanger the procreative manhood of the upper classes.

Godfrey’s family, risking the spread of infection, has vowed to keep him in secret to avoid “segregation for life among strangers with never a hope of release” (2:500). As happens so often in Doyle’s stories, good fortune saves the scion of this noble family. A physician determines that the disease is not leprosy but pseudo-leprosy, so that hope is restored, in this particular case, while fears of infection remain on the broader social level.

Like diseases, criminals become considerably less frightening when identified. This relationship emerges most clearly in “The Adventure of the Dying Detective” (1917), where disease and crime become inseparable. Doyle had reportedly “begged” Joe Bell for plots, and “Dr. Bell suggested in 1892 that Holmes pit himself against a germ-murderer, and hinted at knowledge of one such case” (Liebow 178). The idea led to Doyle’s tale of biological warfare, in which a panic-stricken Watson encounters his idol’s mind and body apparently disintegrating under the force of a tropical disease. Holmes’s long-suffering landlady tells Watson, “he has been working at a case . . . in an alley near the river, and he has brought this illness back with him” (2:386). Holmes himself calls the illness “a coolie disease from Sumatra,” explaining that “there are many problems of disease, many strange pathological possibilities, in the East, dear Watson” (2:387-88). The detective himself views the Orient as a source of bacterial invaders that represent more general fears.

Holmes states that his disease must be Eastern in origin because he has recently been working with Chinese sailors, investigating the death of a man from the same disease because he found it “very surprising that he should have contracted an out-of-the-way Asiatic disease in the heart of London” (2:395-96). This cover story, which is largely false—Holmes has been working among Easterners, but is not sick—works so well because it plays on the

characters' and readers' view of the East as a source of unknown threats that might one day infiltrate the capital. Sending for Culverton Smith, a Sumatran planter and an independent bacteriological researcher who has studied the disease, Holmes reveals that Smith, through bacteriological warfare, murdered the first man, his own nephew, and then attempted to murder Holmes when he discovered it. Holmes, of course, disempowers the murder weapon and its designer by revealing its mechanism. Outwitting a brilliant tactitioner of covert tactics, he has merely feigned the symptoms of the disease with makeup in order to entrap Smith. Although the plot is far-fetched, Doyle's story expresses widespread popular concerns. What, wondered the British in the 1890s, were people bringing home from the colonies? What new germs threatened the health of the imperial body?

Whether they lived in London or the countryside, the British of Doyle's era had good reason to wonder, for the structure of the Empire ensured that the purely "local" no longer existed. Repeatedly, in Holmes's cases, an apparently trivial local event proves to be of vital national interest. From a moral perspective, which in the Holmes stories works a lot like the bacteriological one, every misdeed becomes a germ that threatens the entire social body, never just one region alone. The frayed threads that Doyle's detective follows lead invariably into the center of the imperial power network. Holmes's famous restatement of a traditional literary metaphor gives his first case its title ("A Study in Scarlet") and suggests from the outset that Doyle saw all local problems as vital to the Empire: "There's the scarlet thread of murder running through the colorless skein of life, and our duty is to unravel it, and isolate it, and expose every inch of it" (1:33). In literary texts, the "red thread," which the reader needs to detect and follow, is a pattern of images and ideas that create meaning. The "red thread" is also the mark of identity, of "self," a pattern that distinguishes each text from all others and identifies all rope through which it runs as the property of the British navy. From a medical perspective, it suggests the arteries and capillaries which unite the body through its system of common circulation. Holmes's mission in the Empire, then, is not to eliminate crime by himself. Crime, for him, gives life meaning; it gives Doyle's texts a reason to exist. Holmes's task is more one of identification, of distinguishing "self," so that it may be preserved, and "other," so that it may be eliminated. By showing his reader **how an intelligent man can train himself to see the many germs**

threatening the imperial body, Doyle hopes to recruit a new generation of surveillant physician-warriors to defend the Empire.¹²

Blackmail: Repressing Unwanted Relations

Economically, as well as biologically, hidden germs threaten the nation's health, and certain crimes predominate in Holmes's cases. Although his foes kidnap and murder (they never rape), steal and kill, most often they attempt to get something for nothing, using special knowledge to subvert the economic system, the real lifeblood of the British Empire. The blackmailers Holmes faces come so close to succeeding because his clients invariably have so much to hide. While maintaining the facades of "old," "respectable" families, they rely on colonial funds and foreign marriages to maintain a status they no longer deserve. The economic connections on which they depend thus contradict the closed and private social structure they desire, creating a system that is ultimately unstable because it is built on lies.

The age of infections and colonies, which has rendered the hermetic aristocrat obsolete, calls instead for a new man like Holmes, who has access to all social levels and who, while upholding traditional class boundaries in his elitist statements, ignores them in practice.¹³ The imperial gentleman, as one old servant puts it in "The Adventure of Wisteria Lodge" (1917), has "sold his soul to the devil in exchange for money and expects his creditor to come up and claim his own" (2:313). Although Doyle and his characters make many attempts to present England, particularly the British home, as tranquil and secure, the very existence of the stories undermines this illusion, for a realm of perfect law and order would have no need for the detective and his formidable intelligence network. They represent the longing that gave rise to Holmes in the first place: the desire to be safe, with their imperial capital, on their own turf. With the sharp-eyed detective as an immune system and intelligence network, they can have their colonial cake and eat it too, maintaining both their imperial connections and their traditional social boundaries.

The opening of *A Study in Scarlet*, Holmes's very first story, reveals that England's worst fears have already been realized: London is a cesspool and has been for some time. Watson, as narrator, describes the city as "that great cesspool into which all the loungers and idlers of the Empire are irresistibly drained" (1:4). In the noi-

some capital, the heart of the Empire's communications system, the offal of the old world mingles with the refuse of the new, and the city becomes a breeding ground for evil germs where ferment spreads rapidly among the disgruntled foreigners and natives. The city is most frightening because of the innumerable connections it establishes between people, making the communication of deadly diseases and seditious ideas inevitable yet difficult to trace.

Holmes, however, loves London. He loves London because he *is* London, as Doyle implies when he describes the city and Holmes's intelligence in the same terms in *The Sign of Four*: Watson observes "the monster tentacles which the giant city was throwing out into the country" (1:122). Conscious of his Empire's railroads, telegraphs, periodicals, and growing communications system, Doyle presents London as a web, a living network forever extending its processes and its connections. It is a body of its own sort, with an extensive circulatory system that can spread evil. Holmes, as a bacteriologist surveying London, revels in the limitless possibilities for communication the city provides, watching with pleasure "the ever-changing kaleidoscope of life as it ebbs and flows through Fleet Street and the Strand" (1:581). Like Koch, he aims to see and to identify, not to cure; the imperial body will be cured later, by the future doctors he inspires and the moral antisera they develop.

Fittingly, the Empire's watchman is an integral part of this communications net, his own "intelligence" reflecting the structure in which he must operate. Holmes "loved to lie in the very center of five millions of people, with his filaments stretching out and running through them, responsive to every little rumor or suspicion of unsolved crime" (1:579). His brilliant adversary, like the Boers, is also perfectly adapted to his environment and is described in the same terms. Moriarty "sits motionless, like a spider in the center of its web, but that web has a thousand radiations, and he knows well every quiver of each of them" (1:645). Both descriptions illustrate imperial fantasies about foreigners and about disease. The image of Moriarty, who uses his web to sense every movement of victims he might eat, expresses terror about enemies within England who use the Empire's own intelligence and power structures to devour respectable citizens. The description of Holmes, who is ultimately more vital because the filaments of his web are the processes of his own body, expresses a wish for an omnipotent intelligence system that operates incessantly to safeguard citizens with bad consciences against the revenge of those they have wronged. Both networks,

the good and the evil, reflect the actual network of the British Empire, whose quivering filaments betrayed the anger of victims throughout the world. The hero, his arch-rival, and their creator all embody the economic system that gave birth to them and the city whose lifeblood must flow to keep the Empire alive.

Holmes's process of detection thus again resembles the task of the hygienist, since both the sleuth and the scientist serve their nations by tracing links between people, one to follow malicious intentions, the other to follow a microbe. Ultimately, Doyle suggests to his readers, the creation of an Empire has brought the jungle to London, so that it becomes possible to hunt exotic game in the imperial city. Like imperialism itself, big-game hunting was defended as a "civilizing" process, one that liberated people from the raging beasts they imagined were stalking them. Asked by an angry Count why he has been "dogging" him, Holmes replies, "Come now, Count. You used to shoot lions in Algeria." "Yes," admits the Count, for "the sport—the excitement—the danger!" "And, no doubt," adds Holmes, "to rid the country from a pest?" (2:509). Doyle's choice of words here links both Holmes's sleuthing and the mission of imperialism to Koch's hunt for microbes. "To free the country from a pest," Holmes penetrates all of its social spaces, chasing or stalking his quarry. The reader, in his fantasies, shoots it down; Holmes, like Koch, merely unmasks it. The detective, an urban big-game hunter, thrives in an environment that he is so aptly suited to police, an ever-growing web of limitless connections.

Few people in British society, however, liked these new connections as much as Holmes did. The traditional concept of identity in the society, rooted in heredity and advocated by Doyle's mother, a "fearsome stickler for genealogy," had featured carefully controlled family "connections" (Carr 7). A culture that placed great value on privacy, the British respected the boundaries of the individual, so that the many new possibilities for connections created by imperial expansion became a threat. To defend themselves and allow their Empire to survive biologically and economically, readers had to be forced to acknowledge these new connections, even though their very identity, as they had constructed it until now, rode on suppressing them. Holmes thus serves a society that both wants and does not want relations, and he serves it by revealing them so that they may either be eliminated or repressed, but always with the demand that his clients face the truth.

As a “private” consulting detective, Holmes solves the crimes of England’s most illustrious families because their reputations and their identities depend on the concealment of their unwanted connections. In a society in which the communications network is burgeoning, Holmes’s clients fight a losing battle to suppress their relations. If the Holmes stories are any indication, England’s first families always have something to hide, although the stories may merely reflect the wishful thinking of middle-class readers.¹⁴ Watson reports that “The Adventure of the Second Stain” “implicates so many of the first families in the kingdom that for many years it will be impossible to make it public” (1:612). Although he reveals their corruption, however, the narrator, like the author, loves and reveres these families and sees it as his duty to protect them even as he hints about their sins. In maintaining the discretion that keeps him in business, Holmes bows to traditional cultural rules that the wealthier and “older” the family, the more tightly their borders must be maintained. At the same time, however, the stories themselves stress that these borders are largely an illusion and that a futile belief in one’s own impermeability is the greatest danger in a bacteriological and imperial age.

“The Adventure of the Priory School” (1903) explicitly links “health” to economic health. Here Holmes assists “one of the greatest subjects of the crown,” who owns 250,000 acres including mineral rights in Wales and Lancashire and has served as Lord of the Admiralty and Chief Secretary of State (1:746). As in “The Adventure of the Blanched Soldier,” the nation’s future, its male bloodline, is threatened. The Duke’s son has disappeared from school, along with his German master, who is found brutally bludgeoned to death. The client finds it difficult to talk to Holmes because “to his intensely aristocratic nature this discussion of his intimate family affairs with a stranger was most abhorrent” (1:753). At first, the culprit appears to be a fired coachman seeking revenge, but Holmes discovers that the father himself has brought about the kidnapping, manipulated by an earlier illegitimate son who “deeply resented those social laws” which precluded his inheriting his father’s estate and who “hated [the] young legitimate heir from the first with a persistent hatred” (1:769). The angry natural son has joined forces with the angry servant to remove the socially sanctioned heir. Although the client is an accessory to murder, Holmes views the respected aristocrat as a victim and helps him to solve the problem quietly. The Duke sends his natural son to Australia, the colony

that, taking in the Empire's unwanted people, becomes a breeding ground for many of the threats with which Holmes must deal. In the end the detective resigns himself to silence, stating that "having secured the future, we can afford to be more lenient with the past" (1:771). Holmes has been able to "secure the future"—to rescue the legitimate heir—however, only by revealing the past, without which he could never have diagnosed the problem. Although he declines to bring the Duke to justice, he makes any further denial of the past impossible, a denial which had put the future at risk.

This case of the Duke who has sequestered his own son, tormented by the fruit of an illicit love affair and the rage of a servant unfairly dismissed, reminds us that as an imperial immune system, Holmes only rarely engages foreign particles working in isolation. The greatest threats to the Empire, Doyle's stories suggest, come not from without but from within, particularly when native outcasts ally themselves with foreign invaders and betray their English stock and culture. Above all, one concludes when reading Holmes's adventures, one must take care whom one allows into one's house.

Economic need, however, inevitably forced the British upper and middle classes to open their doors, creating fears of infiltration that mirror the biological ones. Marriage, itself an economic institution, ranked first among the ways in which connections might be established, and in the Holmes stories, it is one of the primary means by which the colonies permeate the estates of noble families. Although Holmes's clients surround their estates with stone walls topped with glass and raise their drawbridges at night, they marry foreign women, and when British noblemen fail to scrutinize their foreign mates sufficiently, they find themselves connected to the evils of their wives' pasts. The repressed always returns, crossing oceans on the ever-improving ships to seek its revenge in England, for "of all ghosts, the ghosts of our old loves are the worst" (1:514). Holmes unmasks these ghosts, but sometimes too late to save his clients. His failures in these cases suggest that when it comes to miscegenation, even an imperial immune system is not a sufficient defense. Individual citizens must assume responsibility for safeguarding the Empire's bloodlines by refusing willfully to introduce dangerous new ferments.

The socio-economic system, of course, depends on the ability of privileged families to pass on their wealth, so that any threats to

their children really attack the society as a whole. Evil may enter a household—and a society—through its younger members, wayward sons and daughters, particularly through young women who are easily influenced. In “The Adventure of the Illustrious Client” (1927), Doyle makes use of modern science’s discourse on this “vulnerability” to show how foreign forces might penetrate England’s homes. Here mental suggestions, analogous to foreign microbes, “infect” and possess a young heiress. The client, whose name is a “household word in society,” begs Holmes to save his daughter, “a lovely, innocent girl,” who is determined to marry a scoundrel. The confidence man, the notorious Count Gruber, has foreign blood, and Doyle’s description of him recalls early nineteenth-century images of “magnetic” men, with an inborn ability to implant suggestions in others: “His face was swarthy, almost Oriental, with large, dark, languorous eyes which might easily hold an irresistible fascination for women” (2:480). The desperate father voices fears about foreigners seducing England’s women that reverberate beyond his particular case: “this man collects women, and takes a pride in his collection, as some men collect moths or butterflies” (2:472). The clever interloper has specifically told the girl that everyone will slander him and has influenced her through hypnotic suggestion to believe only him. Holmes and Watson try, unsuccessfully, to enlighten her as to the nature of her fiancé, and the seducer is bold enough to explain to them why she has ignored their warnings: “You have heard of post-hypnotic suggestion, Mr. Holmes? . . . a man of personality can use hypnotism without any vulgar passes or tomfoolery” (2:469-70). The seducer is finally stopped not by Holmes or Watson but by an infuriated ex-lover who hurls acid in his magnetic face. The disturbing tale reveals that illustrious clients can never fully control the forces that enter their houses because they can never fully control the minds of their children which can be “infected” by the unsavory characters lurking in the heart of the Empire. Foreign ideas, like foreign germs, can penetrate and destroy the Empire’s first families.

Although young adults are the “weakest link” in families once considered impermeable, older, more powerful Britons are never safe from the consequences of any unwanted “connections” they may have made in their youth. Like syphilis spirochetes, these deadly memories lie in wait, always ready to destroy the imperial body. A society built on contradictions invites blackmail, and the

Holmes stories abound with cases in which angry, rejected people

return to demand payment from those who once needed them and now deny any relation to them. Three of the four Holmes novels, in fact, and 19 of the 56 stories involve a quest for revenge, a quest which Holmes often thwarts (Norton 239). As an author, Doyle builds his plots around revenge so frequently because he knows his readers fear it so greatly.¹⁵

The Moriarty of blackmailers, Charles Augustus Milverton, provides a constant threat to the Empire's most illustrious families. Holmes compares this "king of blackmailers" to a gigantic evil snake who "will squeeze and squeeze until he has drained [his victims] dry," linking him to readers' fears of threatening animals in the colonies (1:792). The image depicts a foreign snake, most likely the Indian cobra, but simultaneously it suggests a bleeding process (which is not the cobra's objective) with an intelligent design. More indicative of the Empire's own actions in India, Doyle's description of Milverton illustrates what Stephen Arata has called "imperial ideology mirrored back as monstrosity" (634).

Collecting compromising documents from "treacherous valets or maids" and "genteel ruffians who have gained the confidence and affection of trusting women," Milverton delights in enriching himself by threatening noble families with ruin (1:792). He always succeeds, explains Holmes, because he never attacks an innocent person, ensuring his invulnerability. Quite possibly, there are no innocent people in the society in which he operates. Engaged by a desperate woman when Milverton threatens to reveal to her illustrious fiancé her imprudent letters to a former lover, Holmes first confronts Milverton unsuccessfully and then resolves to burgle his house, confessing to Watson, "I have always had an idea that I would have made a highly efficient criminal" (1:798). A modern warrior like the Boers, he has no compunction about fighting by stealth. Like a vaccine, he will save the body by mimicking the germ that threatens it. Holmes, with his own sense of justice, finds the burglary "morally justifiable though technically criminal," and takes great pleasure in cracking Milverton's safe, "this green and gold monster, the dragon which held in its maw the reputations of many fair ladies" (1:797, 800). While Holmes and Watson hide, one of Milverton's female victims enters and fatally shoots the blackmailer; then, with the body beside him, Holmes coolly unloads the safe and burns all of the letters it contains. He gives Watson to understand that "it was no affair of ours . . . justice had overtaken a villain," and he tells inspector Lestrade in the conclusion, "I think there are

certain crimes, which the law cannot touch, and which therefore, to some extent, justify private revenge” (1:804-05). Confident that Milverton’s schemes have taught the wayward aristocrats a lesson, Holmes believes that the real problem—their neglect of the good behavior demanded by their social roles—has been solved. As long as they face up to and learn from their past misdeeds, he can “secure the future” without public exposure, which might do more harm than good by causing citizens to question the entire social structure.

Holmes’s scrutiny revitalizes the nation’s morals on the state as well as the individual level. Occasionally Holmes works directly for the government, and the imperial authorities, as depicted by Doyle, unquestionably need him. “The Adventure of the Second Stain,” for instance, follows the panic that ensues when the impetuous, angry letter of a “certain foreign potentate who has been ruffled by some recent colonial developments” disappears, since its tone could lead to such a “dangerous state of feeling” that it “may well mean the expenditure of a thousand millions and the lives of a hundred thousand men” (1:905). The frantic statesman tells Holmes, “The whole of Europe is an armed camp . . . Great Britain holds the scales” (1:906). Holmes defers the war for a few more years by recovering the document from the thief, the statesman’s wife, who was being manipulated by a blackmailer holding an indiscreet letter of her own. As usual, private and public misdeeds emerge as inseparable, and Holmes saves the social body by identifying the moral germ that is weakening it.

Counterfeiting: The Fluidity of Identity

Counterfeiting, the dissemination of symbols detached from their meaning and value, is intimately related to blackmail because it threatens “names.” By associating bloodlines and fortunes with family names, British society had traditionally assigned its citizens value and identity, or lack thereof. Doyle’s later stories, revealing the collapse of this system, depict the desperate struggle for identity in an age in which the Empire opened all families to new ideas and diseases. As shown in works like Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, family “names” had become detached from the lifeblood that once gave them meaning and could be bought and sold on the open market. Doyle’s stories, in a similar way, express fears that the nation’s genealogical and economic sign systems were

breaking down. If present at all, wealth might be new and earned by questionable means, like Charles Baskerville's South African gold. In Doyle's stories, the crimes of the Empire's malefactors reflect the Empire's own economic structure. Counterfeiting, which like blackmail involves getting something for nothing, emerges as the distillation of a much more general social trend. Morally and economically, the colonial "disease" eats away at the Empire's heart as stolen wealth replaces inherited wealth. What is imperialism, after all, but getting something for nothing?

Counterfeiters present a formidable challenge to the British Empire, since when worthless bank notes enter circulation which perfectly mimic those of real economic worth, the entire system by which worth can be represented falls into disrepute. For decades bacteriologists had pointed out germs' resemblance to human cells; like germs, such notes slip into the "body" by stealth and survive briefly because they look like "real" cells. Anxiety about counterfeit money, of course, merely reflects a greater anxiety about counterfeit people. Not surprisingly, foreigners, criminals, anarchists, and scoundrels populate the Holmes stories, successfully passing themselves off as gentleness in the British countryside. These interlopers bear respectable names but carry neither the genetic nor the economic content that those names should guarantee. When Holmes stops a potential counterfeiter who might begin "shoving the queer," his action becomes a metaphor for a much more extensive police action his readers would love to see: the detection of all those who are "passing" in respectable British society.¹⁶

Doyle had admired the Boers' ability to adapt their tactics to those of their adversary, and in his postwar stories, his hero does just that. No one "passes" better than Holmes, and as an immune system for his Empire, Holmes succeeds so often in reaching his target because he moves freely throughout the imperial body. Although he scorns most servants, workers, and country bumpkins, Holmes can assume their identities, win their confidence, and enlist them for his cause, making him the perfect imperial agent. For intelligence purposes, Holmes will work with anyone, from the notorious blackmailer Milverton to the "street arab" Irregulars who "scamper away downstairs like so many rats" (1:41). Holmes states proudly that "my ramifications stretch out into many sections of society," and his connections with the Empire's lowest elements surely provided the greatest assurance to its most powerful (1:863). The lifeblood of England, the Holmes stories imply, includes that

of all of its citizens, not just that of its celebrated bloodlines. Holmes, a modern man, recognizes that to survive, each Englishman must acknowledge the degree to which he is connected to all others, for ignorance of other people leaves one most vulnerable to infection.

Nothing has delighted Doyle's readers more than Holmes's ability to use disguises, his uncanny talent for assuming any face and any voice. He clearly loves masking himself to unmask his opponent. He makes his most shameless use of disguise when, to learn how best to break into Milverton's house, he dresses as a "rakish young workman" and gets himself engaged to the blackmailer's maid. Watson, disturbed, asks, "But the girl, Holmes?" and his hero replies, "You can't help it, my dear Watson. You must play your cards as best you can when such a stake is on the table" (1:796). At stake is the honor of England's most prestigious families, and the Empire's unwarranted confidence in its aristocrats' moral purity is worth the sacrifice of a working girl's heart. He can save the nation only by crossing class boundaries, much as he would like to maintain them himself.

An expert at disguising himself, Holmes excels at unmasking his enemies. Lawrence Rothfield, who has associated Holmes's techniques with new developments in medicine, rightly describes his unmasking procedure as "an invasion of privacy by the private eye," a "humiliation ritual" (Rothfield 139). Koch's vision of every individual as a potential hiding place for deadly bacteria encouraged societies to scrutinize every single person for the sake of the group, so that individuals become "objects of knowledge to be identified" (Rothfield 132). Just as Koch "unveiled the secret life of the anthrax bacillus," Holmes unveils the criminals he tracks down, sometimes literally, as he peels off their false faces and disguises, revealing them to be as mortal and vulnerable as their victims.

As a doctor, Doyle knew all too well that terrifying supernatural threats lose their potency when revealed as natural ones. The first short story Doyle ever published, in fact, described a Kiffir superstition about a demon with glowing eyes "which eyes, when faced by the hero's, turned out to be diamonds in rock-salt" (Carr 27). Holmes unmasking innumerable "curses," reinforcing the Empire's confidence that its science and technology could overcome demonic threats it associated with the people it was colonizing and with its own past. "The Cornish Horror," for instance, is actually the African devil's-foot root; the Sussex vampire is a desperate mother trying to suck poison out of her son's neck; the "curse

of the Sussex coast” is a jellyfish; and the hell-hound of the Baskervilles is really a large dog covered with phosphorous. Like the relentless vision of the bacteriologist, Holmes’s scrutiny of imperial England at first frightened readers because of the multiple threats it exposed. Ultimately, however, it reassured them because, in revealing the vulnerability of the victims, it revealed the vulnerability of the attackers as well.

Holmes’s unveiling, then, alleviates not just neurotic fears of the supernatural but also much more realistic fears in middle-class Victorians about social and economic upheaval. If anyone could mimic the signs of bourgeois respectability, suggesting that such respectability relied on appearance alone, then bourgeois respectability would lose meaning. To preserve the structure of his society, he must prove that social position has a real, corporal basis and is not a signifier that can be randomly attached to different bodies; he must therefore reveal all those who are “passing” as respectable citizens. Holmes, that is, exposes counterfeit people who have infiltrated the social body as free signifiers by imitating people of actual “worth.” If people believe that these impostors signify something of value, the interlopers threaten to disrupt the accepted pairings of signifier and signified that make the society work. Holmes’s unmasking thus serves the desires of the upper and middle classes to see their society as a private club or closed system which one may enter only by birth or through connections that they carefully control (Rothfield 139-41). It also serves as a warning, however, that the class system can be maintained only if privileged citizens play their roles appropriately. Their privileges cannot be maintained by quarantine, since each of Holmes’s adventures proves how easily class and national boundaries can be crossed.

The influx of colonial wealth in the nineteenth century, which allowed a disturbing variety of people to prosper, disrupted the former class hierarchy determined primarily by birth. Holmes, who polices his society to ensure that no one enjoys upper-class status undeservedly, still favors the older system that recognized heredity as the real source of identity and character. Holmes no doubt owes this belief to his creator, who shared it and whose mother taught him the shields and connections of England’s noble families as a sort of catechism (Carr 6-7).¹⁷ Doyle’s descriptions of characters in the stories often suggest that, for better or for worse, personalities are inherited.

Both Doyle and Holmes suspected that character of any class could be passed on, like bodily features, and both use bodies to make inferences about that character. Doyle's teacher, Joe Bell, who had only a "lukewarm belief in physiognomy," nevertheless told his students that "physiognomy helps you to nationality" in observing a patient (Liebow 182, 177). Watson's descriptions of the criminals they encounter consistently reflect his partner's beliefs that, if one can read a profession from a man's hands or his dwelling place from the mud on his boots, one can also read his character from his face. Physiognomical deductions, in fact, come across in the Holmes stories as an integral part of the keen observations for which he is so famous. Asked by Watson how he deduced that a man was an intellectual, he directs his friend's attention to the size of the man's hat, replying that "it is a question of cubic capacity. A man with so large a brain must have something in it" (1:331). In a fascinating simile voiced by Holmes in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Doyle himself invites his readers to view the deciphering of bodies and the deciphering of texts as analogous processes. Both uncover the true "corpus" of meaning beneath superficial signs, like clothing, that can be copied or assumed as a disguise: "there is as much difference to my eyes between the leaded bourgeois type of a *Times* article and the slovenly print of an evening half-penny paper as there could be between your Negro and your Eskimo" (2:29).

Holmes, who deciphers palimpsests as a hobby, reveals how greatly his hobby reflects his profession when he complains that a stretch of trampled ground that once held telltale tracks "will be harder to read now than that palimpsest" (1:847). In reading domestic and foreign bodies and the traces they leave, Holmes diagnoses the patient based on the subtle symptoms he observes. Such observation "permits diagnosis, though the disease cannot be directly observed, on the basis of superficial symptoms or signs" (Ginzburg 87).¹⁸ In reading bodies, writing, and tracks, Holmes thus carries out the tasks of his society's policemen and its doctors, two professions whose methods increasingly resembled each other in the imperial and bacteriological age.

An expert reader of signs, Holmes becomes an expert at detecting signs that have become detached from their traditional meanings. Two of Doyle's later stories deal directly with counterfeiting: *The Valley of Fear* (1914) and "The Adventure of the Three Garridebs" (1927). Interestingly enough, both focus on Americans.¹⁹

The latter story depicts with particular clarity the vulnerability of the Empire to counterfeiters. The American gangster “Killer” Evans concocts an elaborate scheme about a millionaire named “Garrideb” seeking eponymous heirs in order to remove an eccentric old collector from Evans’s dead associate’s apartments and gain access to the counterfeiting press that is concealed there. When cornered by Holmes, Evans compares the Empire’s sign system to that of a master artist, admitting that, had he succeeded in restarting his associate Prescott’s press, not even Holmes could have distinguished the meaningless from the meaningful notes: “No living man could tell a Prescott from a Bank of England, and if I hadn’t put him out he would have flooded London with them” (2:563).²⁰ Holmes thus saves his Empire from inflation and more importantly from a loss of credibility. Economically and morally exhausted in contrast to what Doyle viewed as a more “vigorous” Anglo-Saxon country, England now relied upon Africa and Asia for its resources and wealth. Prescott and Evans—like the German counterfeiters in “The Engineer’s Thumb”—have come to England to disseminate their false signifiers because they feel a natural affinity for its counterfeit society.²¹ In a rising power like Germany or the United States, the stories suggest, social position is still linked to achievement. There is no need to mimic traditional class signs to win status, and counterfeiters have no place there.

Conclusion: The Face in the Window

Holmes, with the daunting task of restoring economic, moral, and biological health to British society, forces his clients to look squarely at the counterfeiting in their own lives. Nevertheless, he sometimes leaves his clients with a vow of silence. His own goal, his personal uncovering of the “red thread” of the case, does not require that he bring the guilty to justice. If Holmes and Watson revealed to the public all of the crimes they discovered, in fact, they could place at risk the ideology they seek to uphold. Holmes tells Watson that “once or twice in my career I feel that I have done more real harm by my discovery of the criminal than ever he had done by his crime. . . . I had rather play tricks with the law of England than with my own conscience” (1:895-96). This startling confession, which recalls Lessing’s revelation that he cared more for the search after truth than for truth itself, suggests that the Empire’s legal system no longer fulfills its citizens’ desires for “justice” in a

new social order. Doyle's readers want to be pardoned for their theft and murder in the colonies, and, simultaneously, they envision themselves as living in a land of law and order. Holmes exists because of this unstable relationship between their ideal notion of British justice, in which a crime is a crime, and imperial justice, in which a crime in the colonies is not a crime at home and one can safeguard the dirty secrets of one's imperial wealth. A believer in "private" justice, Holmes acts as an intermediary between the traditional and the modern, the ideal and the actual law, insisting only that his clients "face up" to the truth.

Throughout the Holmes stories, his respectable clients are frightened by disembodied faces, often distorted by emotion or disease, peering in or out at them through their windows. Poor James Dodd discovers his friend Godfrey, the "Blanched Soldier," in just such a fashion: "He was outside the window, Mr. Holmes, with his face pressed against the glass. . . . He was deadly pale—never have I seen a man so white. I reckon ghosts may look like that; but his eyes met mine, and they were the eyes of a living man" (2:491-92). Such nightmarish glimpses of unusual faces abound in Doyle's postwar stories, suggesting the presence and the thwarted desires of those who have been excluded from British society.²² The face in the window, then, reflects the psychology of imperial doublethink, as the invaders and the thieves, determined to see themselves as virtuous in their own land, project onto their windowpanes their repressed fears of foreign forces who may invade the Empire's heartland (Arata 623).

In "The Adventure of Wisteria Lodge," a frightened man believes he has seen "the devil" looking in at him through a window: the face "wasn't black . . . nor was it white, nor any color that I know, but a kind of queer shade like clay with a splash of milk in it. . . . And the look of it—the great staring goggle eyes, and the line of white teeth like a hungry beast" (2:306). A physical correlate of moral fears, these recurring faces suggest the eruption of a colonial Other into the English soul. In this case, the man has actually seen a mulatto cook, a practitioner of voodoo, who has come to destroy a bloodthirsty Central American dictator who has concealed himself in the British countryside. Both the face and the story suggest that the violent tropics and the British domestic sphere are not as far apart as they appear to be. When Holmes asks Miss Burnet, "How can an English lady join in such a murderous affair?" she replies, "What does the law of England care for the rivers of blood

shed years ago in San Pedro, or for the shipload of treasure which this man has stolen? To you they are like crimes committed in some other planet” (2:317). Although in this case the crimes committed are not the direct results of British imperialism, the face reminds Doyle’s readers that the blood-spilling they associate with the tropics is never far from home. Her reply, furthermore, encourages readers to “look into” British colonial practices, which may likewise be criminal.

These disembodied faces recur in the Holmes stories not merely because the British fear an invasion of foreign microbes or fortune hunters, but because of their anxieties about their own identity. Bodies in the imperial age exist as fragments, and Holmes’s refusal to respect “the body’s integrity as a living totality” reflects both cultural and medical changes (Rothfield 135). While it multiplied the possibilities of connections between people and filled coffers long depleted, the imperial communications net with its monster tentacles dissolved the traditional hierarchy that had conferred upon the elite a feeling of personal wholeness. Holmes’s genius thus bears an uneasy relationship to his society’s denial, since the very industrialization and imperialism that made it prosper destroyed the “closed” sense of self to which its citizens so desperately clung. If one conceives of one’s identity in terms of borders, new connections can only undermine it.

Some people, of course, benefitted from the increased social mobility, but the workers suffered the same bodily shattering as the aristocrats when they left the land to become “hands” in the Empire’s factories. Watching the London pedestrians pass by lighted shop windows one evening, Watson describes the “endless procession of faces which flitted across these narrow bars of light. . . . Like all humankind, they flitted from gloom into the light and so back into the gloom once more” (1:120-21). The anonymous citizens of London, like foreigners, appear as disembodied faces, lacking identities and histories.

In the Holmes stories, the body of the Empire is best represented by Watson himself, middle-aged, somewhat overweight, and troubled by the Jezail bullet he carries in his leg from the Afghan campaign. Solidly bourgeois, compassionate, and eager to act, Watson embodies both Doyle’s readers and the hope of the Empire. Holmes, although he teaches the modern science and warfare necessary for salvation, represents simultaneously the degeneracy sapping the Empire’s strength. A descendant of landowners, with an

artistic strain, Holmes eats and sleeps poorly, has sensitive nerves, is tainted by drugs, and promises to be a biological failure, a misogynist unlikely to reproduce. Watson, in contrast, marries and will most likely create new Englishmen. To save England from its colonials and from itself Doyle hopes not to create a society of Holmeses, but a society of enlightened Watsons. The doctor-narrator who turns Holmes's insights into substantial narratives also offers the "content" his society so desperately needs, a respectable and satisfyingly real British "corpus" to which one can safely attach the signifier "middle-class." If only, Doyle seems to imply, England had citizens who live like Watson and see like Holmes. To see the biological, economic, and moral forces that threaten them, they must see themselves as they are.

Notes

1. All references to Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories are taken from *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Novels and Stories*, and will be given by volume and page number in this text.

2. Bruno LaTour, examining the relationship between French bacteriology and colonialism, views the two as interdependent cultural developments. Stephen Arata, in a fascinating study of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), finds that the novel is a "narrative of reverse colonization": "The fear is that what has been represented as the 'civilized' world is on the point of being colonized by 'primitive' forces . . . a terrifying reversal has occurred: the colonizer finds himself in the position of the colonized, the exploiter becomes exploited, the victimizer victimized. Such fears are linked to a perceived decline—racial, moral, spiritual—which makes the nation vulnerable to attack from more vigorous, 'primitive' peoples" (623). Doyle was acquainted with Stoker, and Doyle's stories, which express the same fears, provide an antidote: a British genius who specializes in detecting and unmasking these primitive forces. The Holmes stories also represent a genre that Patrick Brantlinger has called "Imperial Gothic," characterized by a fear of "individual regression or going native; an invasion of civilization by the forces of barbarism or demonism; and the diminution of the opportunities for adventure and heroism in the modern world" (Brantlinger 230).

3. Pierre Nordon finds that the last 15 Holmes stories, written after 1910, differ from the earlier ones in depicting "scenes of horror" which were earlier always subordinated to action. These stories, he believes, have a "morbid ingredient," and Holmes, not always in control of the situation in

which he finds himself, sometimes comes across as a “passive witness” rather than an active solver of his clients’ problems (Nordon 241-43).

4. Pierre Nordon believes that Doyle’s confidence and interest in science help establish him as the spokesperson for a generation, writing that the “fictitious world to which Sherlock Holmes belonged expected of him what the real world of the day expected of its scientists: more light and more justice” (247).

5. According to Lawrence Rothfield, when Holmes reveals the true identities of interlopers, he meets “a pressing cultural or social need: the necessity of restoring confidence in the class order of bourgeois, respectable England, an order threatened . . . by *parvenus* who pose as gentlemen . . . the detective allays petit bourgeois suspicions that middle-class identity is not actually an identity at all, by unmasking interlopers . . . he identifies in order to exclude, and by excluding he shores up a concept of personal identity and a social order that already exists” (Rothfield 140-41).

6. I am indebted to Sander Gilman for linking this image to my bacteriological and immunological reading of the Holmes stories.

7. Doyle’s discussion of the way Koch’s tuberculosis cure worked, in 1890, provides an interesting parallel to his depiction of Holmes’s role in society: “Koch has never claimed that his fluid kills the tubercle bacillus. On the contrary, it has no effect on it, but destroys the low form of tissue in the meshes of which the bacilli lie . . . it will only be in very exceptional cases that the bacilli are all expelled.” He concludes that “it continually removes the traces of the enemy, but it still leaves him deep in the invaded country” (“Dr. Koch” 556). In the end, Koch’s remedy proved valueless as a curative agent but was highly valuable as a diagnostic one. Holmes, like Koch’s lymph, breaks up “low forms” of British society which have become inflamed due to foreign agents.

8. Carlo Ginzburg, who compares Holmes’s deductive method to Freud’s psychoanalysis and Morelli’s method of identifying painters’ works through apparently insignificant details, identifies the detective’s strategy as an essentially medical one. As detectives, all three read subtle signs that provide hints about individual “cases” and variations. Created by three doctors, the three systems “attribut[e] identity through characteristics which [are] trivial and beyond conscious control” (Ginzburg 104).

9. Doyle wrote to Bell in June 1892: “It is most certainly to you that I owe Sherlock Holmes. . . . Round the center of deduction and inference and observation which I have heard you inculcate, I have tried to build up a man who pushed the thing as far as it would go” (Liebow 172).

10. Holmes’s *Lebensraum* argument here closely parallels Doyle’s own views. In writing the history of the Boer people, an adversary he greatly

admired, Doyle wrote: "Cold and poverty and storm are the nurses of the qualities which make for Empire. It is the men from the bleak and barren lands who master the children of the light and the heat" (*The Great Boer War* 2).

11. As complex alliances made war with Germany appear inevitable, and while Doyle conceived many of the stories of *His Last Bow*, he was pressing government officials to prepare for a naval blockade by submarine, which he predicted would be the crucial tactic in the coming war for naval dominance. As usual, his warnings about hidden enemies proved correct (Carr 226-28).

12. Doyle's medical outlook, which called for a defensive posture and the use of individual initiative against foreign threats, again affected his military views during the Boer War, when he urged the creation of a Home Militia. "The nation ought to make use of her sportsmen" and organize a National Guard of volunteer riflemen, he wrote to the *Times* (Carr 124).

13. I am grateful to Katherine Arens for her thoughts about Holmes's and Watson's social roles and for her insightful comments on this study.

14. Pierre Nordon writes that the Holmes stories often voice "the only reproach leveled at the aristocracy by their admirers the middle classes; they sometimes fail to set a good example" (255).

15. The Holmes stories that involve blackmail and revenge usually focus on theft, an economic outrage, or betrayal. Although love and jealousy occasionally enter the plots, one suspects that Doyle, like his hero, considered love to be a trivial and essentially uninteresting motive.

16. Stephen Arata finds that British literature of the 1890s generally expresses the wishful thinking of readers that "passing" is impossible for foreigners in British society. Dracula, who "passes" beautifully, is an important exception to this trend (638).

17. Throughout Doyle's boyhood, his mother taught him and made him recite back the lineages and heraldic shields of England's noble families, placing particular stress on his own family tree. This reverence for the aristocracy and the power of heredity, instilled so early in his life, never left him, and throughout his fiction and nonfiction he attempts to explain the behavior of individuals and entire peoples by referring to their genealogies.

18. Holmes, however, is not merely diagnosing but is using this "medical semiotics" to establish identity. During the nineteenth century, fingerprinting and police files came into being as means of identifying criminals as the bourgeoisie sought "identifying signs" to distinguish members of society. Handwriting, another of Holmes's passions, assumed particular importance because of the legal and economic value of the signature as a

means of identification, and fingerprinting offered great possibilities as an identification tool in the colonies, where the natives could not write (Ginzburg 104-06).

19. Doyle greatly admired Americans, seeing them as an energized and revitalized offshoot of the Anglo-Saxon race, transformed by the environmental challenges, increased social mobility, and the general wildness of their society. The American West fascinated him the most and most often played a part in the Holmes stories. Of Irish descent himself, Doyle was well-liked on his tours of the United States, where people told him they found him less stand-offish and pretentious than most British (Carr 95, Nordon 39).

20. Carlo Ginzburg compares Holmes's deductive thinking and careful observation of detail to the techniques of Sigmund Freud, in interpreting dreams, and the late nineteenth-century art critic Giovanni Morelli, who distinguished the original work of master painters from that of students and followers by focusing on apparently insignificant details. Doyle's own comparison of a "Prescott" to a "Bank of England" strongly supports Ginzburg's analogy.

21. "The Valley of Fear," in which the protagonist flees to England to escape a society of murderers, does not conform to this pattern. He does not practice his former profession but lives quite respectably in the British countryside.

22. The most famous such face, of course, appears much earlier, establishing the face in the window as a trend that runs throughout the Holmes stories. In *The Sign of Four*, Major Sholto dies of fright, just as he is about to tell his sons the location of the Agra treasure, when he spies a face looking in out of the darkness: "We could see the whitening of the nose where it was pressed against the glass. It was a bearded, hairy face with wild cruel eyes and an expression of concentrated malevolence" (1:128). The description suggests the faces and emotions of both Small and Tonga, who have returned to avenge the theft of their treasure. Here, the face in the window is that of the thief/victim stalking the victim/thief, who, well aware of the source of his wealth, projects his own sense of evil onto the stalker (Arata 623, Farrell 34).

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