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"A thorough re-search of the premises": Arthur Conan Doyle Rereads Poe's "Purloined Letter"

In 1909, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle paid tribute to Edgar Allan Poe in a speech at the Authors' Club:

> [Poe's] tales were one of the great landmarks and starting-points in the literature of the last century for French as well as English writers. For those tales have been so pregnant with suggestion, so stimulating to the minds of others, that it may be said of many of them that each is a root from which a whole literature has developed. . . . His original and inventive brain was always. . .opening up pioneer tracks for other men to explore.
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> (qtd. in Baring-Gould I, 163 n.62).

Doyle renders Poe as a "landmark," a "starting-point," an "opener" of "pioneer tracks," a gateway to an unexplored expanse. Poe is "pregnant with suggestion, "stimulating to the minds of others," a "root from which a whole literature has developed," a kind of brood mare of the detective genre. Though the speech confirms Doyle's admiration for Poe,[1] it also encodes Doyle's anxiety of influence and concomitant desire to supplant the Great Originator.[2]

I will argue here that Doyle's 1891 story "A Scandal in Bohemia"[3] subtly revises Poe's 1845 tale "The Purloined Letter"[4], primarily by questioning the very "premises" Dupin accuses others of taking for granted. This is no easy task; generations of readers have admired the mathematical elegance of Poe's story. An unscrupulous Parisian diplomat known only as "Minister D-" steals a love-letter from an "exalted personage," probably the Queen. He accomplishes the theft during an ordinary business meeting simply by exchanging the letter for a similar piece of paper while the Queen, silenced by her husband's presence, stands by powerless to protest. When exhaustive police searches of the Minister's "premises" fail to turn up the compromising letter, the Prefect seeks Dupin's help. Dupin deduces the solution by performing what he punningly calls "a thorough re-search of the premises": he reconsiders the police's premise that criminals always hide their booty. Given the failure of the searches, Dupin reasons, the letter must be stashed in plain sight. He recoups it by precisely re-enacting its earlier theft:

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[1] In "To an Undiscerning Critic," Doyle repeats the combination of praise and censure:
"As the creator I've praised to satiety
Poe's Monsieur Dupin, his skill and variety. . . .
[Holmes], the created, would scoff and would sneer,
Where I, the creator, would bow and revere. . ."
(Qtd. in Baring-Gould I, 364 n.52 (n.d., no source).

[2] Doyle's ambivalence towards Poe is encoded in Holmes's rejection of Dupin. In a "Study in Scarlet" Watson makes the mistake of comparing Holmes favorably to Dupin and Lecoq as characters. Holmes unceremoniously rejects all such comparisons and asserts his own primacy, defining himself against them not only as a "real" person compared to fictional characters, but also as a detective. Watson is irritated by Holmes's outburst, but ultimately persuaded.

[3] "A Scandal in Bohemia" was first published in *The Strand* in 1891, then in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* in 1892.

[4] "The Purloined Letter" was first published in *The Gift* in 1845, then anthologized in *The Tales* later that same year. The Penguin edition incorporates Poe's own later corrections.

he disguises himself, visits the Minister, distracts him, and exchanges the inverted, readdressed letter for a lookalike containing a nasty rebuke coded in Latin.

In several long digressions, Dupin attributes his success to two factors: a habit of rigorous deduction through observation and a willingness to challenge *a priori* assumptions.[5] Dupin argues that the police fail because they "'consider only their *own* ideas of ingenuity'" (340). Because the police assume *a priori* that the letter is hidden, their exacting searches yield nothing. Yet though Dupin cleverly locates the letter by reversing the principle that underlies the police's premise, he never questions the assumptions that undergird the theft of the letter itself - the idea that a woman's sexual transgression can imperil the very ship of state. Moreover, Dupin's machinelike solution of the crime flies in the face of the flexible intelligence he attributes to the master criminal. Surely the Minister D-, clever enough to have secreted the letter by anticipating the police's premises, must also be clever enough to anticipate and deflect Dupin's too-easy reversal of the theft.

Doyle's "A Scandal in Bohemia" enlists the structure of Poe's story and focuses closely on its "re-searching" of "premises." Sherlock Holmes is approached by the King of Bohemia, who alleges that his jealous former mistress, the retired performer Irene Adler, has threatened to disrupt the King's imminent betrothal to a young princess by sending her a photograph that documents their illicit affair. When exhaustive searches by the King's agents fail to turn up the photograph, Holmes disguises himself in order to spy on Adler and inveigle himself into her house. However, while Holmes's *a priori* assumptions about women help him locate the photograph, he fails to retrieve it for the King. Adler thwarts both the King's and the detective's plans by abruptly marrying another man, leaving the country, and incriminating the King himself. Holmes is left dazzled and humbled, his *a priori* assumptions about women and about sexual transgression in shreds.

The parallels between the two stories are unmistakable - the narrator sidekick, the theft of the compromising document, the bumbling police, the literal-minded search, the resourceful blackmailer, the shape-shifting detective, the astonishing reversal at closure. Both stories foreground the importance of deductive reasoning by opening with an "introductory exercise" that allows the detective to demonstrate his powers of deduction through observation. Dupin scrutinizes his companion's face intensely, then lays out his recent train of thought; Holmes reconstructs his companion's living habits by interpreting his appearance. All signifiers of facial expression and sartorial detail in these exercises prove stable: both Holmes and Dupin generalize flawlessly that "x" equals "y." Yet both stories emphasize that ideas, and the linguistic signs that encode them, are inherently unstable. Dupin's punning promise to provide "a thorough re-search of the premises" signals his awareness that signifiers are multivalent and cannot be taken *a priori*, at face value. His promise to conduct "a thorough re-search of the premises" signifies both "another search of the building" and "an investigation of the assumptions" - the two services Dupin performs in retrieving the letter.

"A Scandal in Bohemia" constitutes "a thorough re-search of the premises" of Poe's story in both senses. Like a literal search of a building, it turns up the key elements of Poe's tale. But it also questions Poe's assumptions, particularly his celebration of a male detective's redemption of a kingdom allegedly compromised by female sexual transgression. Many of us regard the Sherlock Holmes narratives as fundamentally conservative, as Rosemary Hennessy and Rajeswari Mohan have said, "part of the general work of crisis containment performed by ideology at the *fin de siècle*." Yet Doyle subtly problematizes the sexual double standard Irene Adler has transgressed. By allowing Adler to thwart Holmes's efforts to construct and entrap her as a "criminal," Doyle calls into question the ideological implications of the male detective's deductive methodology, as well as the motives and credibility of her royal accuser. Dupin has

[5] Webster defines the adverb *a priori* as "1: by reasoning from definitions formed or principles assumed: DEDUCTIVELY. 2: without examination or analysis: PRESUMPTIVELY. 3: independently of experience: INTUITIVELY." The adjective *a priori* is 1a: marked by reasoning or deducing consequences from definitions formed or principles assumed: DEDUCTIVE. . . . 2: without examination or analysis" (107).

it easy; signifiers simply reverse in the world in which only he has a name. (The other characters reliably behave in direct contradiction to their titles: "Minister," "Exalted Personage," "Prefect.") While "A Scandal in Bohemia" reverses the conventional sexual politics of "The Purloined Letter," it also manages to expand the hermeneutical borders of detective fiction itself by challenging readers to see signifiers, and the assumptions they encode, "differently."

Like the ingenious Minister D-, Doyle appropriates Poe's "compromising document" by turning its key premises inside out. Doyle chiefly questions the premise that Adler, as a singer and putative *demimondaine*, is unchaste, thus categorically "dishonorable," thus putatively criminal. The King's denigration of Adler results from certain *a priori* patriarchal assumptions about gender and class: notably, that unchaste women are categorically untrustworthy and unmarriageable, and that commoners, regardless of intrinsic merit, are inferior to those of royal blood and wealth. And like the Minister, Doyle hides his critique in "plain sight," in a series of shifting signifiers that become sites of punning slippage through repetition and defamiliarization. The words "groom," "sovereign," and "minister," words that correspond to the parts played by the male principles in the story, shift meaning suggestively during Holmes's pursuit of Adler. The roles of "groom," "sovereign," and "minister" are those of men who legitimate women's sexual activity in patriarchal culture: the "groom" or man who husbands a woman, the "sovereign" or monarch who emblematizes the position of "Sire," and the "minister" or religious solemnizer of matrimonial vows. Holmes, who duplicitously assumes two of these roles during his investigation, discovers that their meanings are subject to change abruptly, involving him in empathic entanglements he has failed to anticipate.

Holmes, who disguises himself as a horse-groom to in order to surveille Adler, is startled when he hears her servants praise Adler for her sexual monogamy. This truth is thrust upon him when he pursues Adler and her fiance, Godfrey Norton, posthaste to a church. There, Norton summarily pulls Holmes out of the shadows and up to the altar to witness their marriage. Holmes, the "groom"-in-disguise and proxy for that reluctant groom, the King, is

> half-dragged up to the altar, and before I knew where I was I found myself mumbling responses which were whispered in my ear. . . . It was all done in an instant, and there was the gentleman thanking me on the one side and the lady on the other, while the clergyman beamed on me in front. It was the most preposterous position in which I ever found myself in my life. . . (169)

The bride rewards the false groom with a "sovereign" for his trouble. A "sovereign," of course, is a coin worth one pound sterling; its name is a metonym for the monarch's portrait stamped on its face. In its adjectival form, the word "sovereign" also means "excellent," "unsurpassable," "independent." The meaning of "sovereign" blurs precisely at the moment that the King's depiction of Adler as a lovesick avenger is called into question. By handing Holmes the sovereign, Adler metonymically seems to transfer responsibility for the King and the system he represents away from herself into the hands of the detective. The sovereign then becomes an emblem of Holmes's emotional entanglement with his quarry. With uncharacteristic sentimentality he vows "to wear it on [his] watch-chain in memory of the occasion" (169). He seems to have begun to view Adler - and himself - quite differently.

Holmes's second disguise, as an "amiable and simple-minded Nonconformist clergyman" (170), allows him to enter Adler's home under pretense of injury. At that moment, Watson detonates a smoke bomb and cries "Fire!" in hopes of sending Adler running to safeguard the photograph. Holmes arrogantly reasons *a priori* that "when a woman thinks that her house in on fire, her instinct is at once to rush to the thing which she values most. . . . A married woman grabs at her baby; an unmarried one reaches for her jewel-box" (173). Adler behaves as predicted, and Holmes and Watson decamp, intending to return the next morning to demand the photograph. But the plan goes awry when Adler recognizes Holmes in spite of his "minister" disguise and correctly infers his plan. Having "seen through" Holmes's stratagems, she departs well in advance of the detectives. Thus Holmes's "ministrations" for the King - the attempted

thievery that allies him to Poe's Minister D- - come to naught. Yet Holmes has already acted as "minister" to Adler when he helped solemnize her marriage to Norton in his persona of "groom." Ironically, by informally "ministering" to her marriage and then by failing at his formal role as "minister", Holmes aids and abets Adler's escape from the King who has begun increasingly to seem like the true blackmailer and criminal of the story. Adler suggests as much in her parting letter to Holmes:

> As for the photograph, your client may rest in peace. I love and am loved by a better man than he. The King may do what he will without hindrance from one he has cruelly wronged. I keep it only to safeguard myself and to preserve a weapon which will always secure me from any steps which he might take in the future. (175)

Holmes is disconcerted by his experiences as not-quite-groom, not-quite-minister in the Adler affair. The disguises he adopts to gain unauthorized knowledge of Adler either engulf or betray him, causing him to behave in ways that force him to re-examine his assumptions. In attempting to force Adler to release the photograph - which is rightfully hers - Holmes himself resorts to criminal tactics such as entering under false pretenses. By disguising himself, he engages in the kind of public role-playing for which actresses were routinely condemned. As the King's proxy, he mounts the kind of unscrupulous, vengeful pursuit of which Adler stands accused. Adler, in contrast, appears increasingly to be a conventionally respectable, resourceful woman who simply wants to marry without interference from her jealous former lover. Ultimately, her letter suggests, the King has given her cause to fear for her life: though married, she must keep the photograph to "safeguard herself" and "secure herself" from "any steps which [the King] might take in the future" (175).

Holmes's conventional assumptions about gender and class, assumptions voiced in their extreme by the King of Bohemia, are inverted, defamiliarized, and convincingly deconstructed by Adler. Though he fails to obtain the photograph, Holmes makes two gestures that suggest that Adler's instruction has been reward enough. First Holmes ironically upbraids the King, who arrogantly proclaims

> "What a woman - oh, what a woman? Did I not tell you how quick and resolute she was? Would she not have made an admirable queen? Is it not a pity that she was not on my level?"
> "From what I have seen of the lady she seems indeed to be on a very different level to your majesty," said Holmes coldly. (175)

Second, Holmes alters his assumptions about women. Watson notes

> [Holmes] used to make merry over the cleverness of women, but I have not heard him do it of late. And when he speaks of Irene Adler, it is always under the honourable title of "the woman." (175)

Holmes's growing awareness of the slipperiness of the signifiers "minister," "groom," and "sovereign" encourages him to reconsider other signifiers such as "woman" and "honor." (Likewise, the "Bohemia" of the title itself, of course, refers to the King's ancestral homeland, to Adler's demimonde, and to Holmes himself, who Watson says "loathed every form of society with his whole Bohemian soul" (161). By the end of the story, when the concept of a "scandal" in "Bohemia" is reinvoked, we must question which of the three "bohemian" worlds has been more scandalized by the whole affair.) Signifiers are subject to arbitrary shifts in meaning that cannot be accounted for through purely deductive logic. Seemingly stable notions like identity are subject to reinterpretation and appropriation through disguise and mimicry. The actress, as a professional impersonator, has known this all along.

It is appropriate, then, that in refolding and redefining Poe's "Letter," Doyle inverts and frays, but does not entirely break, the pattern of repeated and "readdressed" signs. By retaining the photograph, Adler assumes the role of Dupin; like Dupin, she leaves behind signifiers that upbraid her pursuers and articulate her principles. Her letter upstages the Great Detective by documenting the denouement of the

chase. It also indicts the King as cruel, vengeful, and menacing. (Lest Adler be accused of exaggerating the King's malevolence, Doyle reminds us that she is dead at the start of the story; the cause of her demise before age 30 is left to the reader's imagination.) Adler leaves behind a second "document": a "revision" of the coveted photograph, one that encodes her "sovereignty" by depicting her alone. From the men who have pursued her in order to control her supposedly transgressive behavior, Adler reappropriates the right to define herself. It is significant that Holmes, rather than the King, retains the photograph as a reminder of "the woman" who has redefined his ideas not simply about gender and class, but about the dangers of shifty signifiers and *a priori* assumptions in general.

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