

**The Canon, the Fan, and the Academic:  
Review of Sabine Vanacker and Catherine Wynne (eds.),  
*Sherlock Holmes and Conan Doyle: Multi-Media Afterlives***

*Nadine Boehm-Schnitker*

(Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany)

**Sabine Vanacker and Catherine Wynne (eds.).**  
*Sherlock Holmes and Conan Doyle: Multi-Media Afterlives.*  
Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013  
ISBN: 978-0-230-30050-7 (HB) £ 50.00, \$ 85.00

\*\*\*\*\*

**S***herlock Holmes and Conan Doyle: Multi-Media Afterlives* is a highly readable and versatile collection of essays which hit the market shortly after Lynette Porter's edition *Sherlock Holmes for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Essays on New Adaptations* (2012) and *Sherlock and Transmedia Fandom: Essays on the BBC Series* co-edited by Louisa Ellen Stein and Kristina Busse (2012), both published by McFarland. A conference to be held in London in June 2013 called "Sherlock Holmes, Past and Present", in its turn, testifies to the current popularity of all things Sherlockian. Feeding on, disseminating and analysing the contemporary desire of fans, artists, academics, Doyleans, Sherlockians, and other interest groups, these collections make a very timely attempt to grapple with the ongoing craze about the detective, his 'Boswell' and their creator. With a close succession of cultural products such as Guy Ritchie's hitherto two neo-Victorian film adaptations, *Sherlock Holmes* (2009) and *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011), the BBC production *Sherlock* (2010-) and the release of the American series *Elementary* (2012-), the academic market seems pressed to equally accelerate its output to keep pace with current reproductions of 'the canon'. The plethora of adaptations and appropriations over a wide range of media from the audio book to fan-zines invite exploration in terms of processes of production, consumption, identity formation, representational strategies and their contextualisation in discursive formations. Wynne and Vanacker

---

provide a very helpful entry into and a comprehensive overview of many relevant aspects of the afterlives of Arthur Conan Doyle and his iconic sleuth for a readership comprising students, teachers and academics as well as the Holmes-aficionado.

To discuss the single contributions as well as the over-all coherence of the edited collection, I will take my cue from Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, more precisely from the narrator's description of the melodrama as pieces of "streaky bacon" in Chapter 17 (Dickens, loc. 22716). As the volume contents are not subdivided under thematic headings, the unifying principle behind the collection must emerge through the order of the single contributions themselves; "streaky bacon" seems an apt metaphor for the collection's structure, addressing the internal variety of topics as well as the overall relish of the essays.

Vanacker and Wynne's comprehensive and informative introduction sets out to tell "A tale of two homes: from 221b to Undershaw", drawing on the locales hosting Holmes and his author, respectively; thus, the editors highlight not only the different amounts of interest paid the writer and his creation, but also raise the question of the burgeoning tourist industry which turns Britain's cultural products into cult objects and marketing ploys at the same time. Discussing how Holmes, one of the many characters "[e]merging from the recesses of a late-Victorian psyche" (p. 3), is turned into an iconic figure, the introduction straddles several functions: it documents the current and ongoing popularity of Holmes by eloquently weaving the plethora of Holmesian multi-mediality into the text, introduces the individual contributions, provides food for thought and mentions some of the terminology relevant for the collection as a whole. However, the introduction as well as some of the following articles seem to sacrifice methodological and terminological clarity for a high degree of readability. One example is the slightly confusing usage of the term 'pastiche'. Since hardly any contribution draws on adaptation studies per se, the term bears the brunt of defining the relationship between the Doylean canon and its contemporary versions, which is why a more thorough discussion of the term by the editors would have been helpful. The introduction, for example, describes Guy Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes* (2009) as a 'pastiche', whereas the BBC production *Sherlock* is classified as an 'adaptation'. However, Margaret Drabble defines 'pastiche' as an "imitation of the style of another author", frequently intended to pay homage to its pretext(s); moreover,

according to Drabble, it may encompass a particular kind of ‘adaptation’, either one written in the above mentioned laudatory fashion or one “made up of fragments pieced together or copied with modifications from an original” (Drabble 2000: 769). If the latter, the editors’ differential attribution of pastiche and adaptation does not hold, as both Guy Ritchie’s films and the BBC production draw on a large number of pretexts and eclectically reassemble them. Also, both are arguably imitative at least of aspects of Doyle’s style despite their very different kinds of ‘modernisations’.

For neo-Victorianists, a clearer position as to the difference between ‘neo-Victorian’ and ‘post-Victorian’ would have been useful. The editors argue that “Holmes was neo-Victorian long before the term attained academic and popular vogue” and that we are, in Christine L. Krueger’s terms, “in many respects post-Victorians”, without drawing attention to the differences in usage (p. 1). Another neo-Victorian appetizer lies in the argument that Holmes “challenges neo-Victorian categorisation” (p. 1) as he is situated between “lived reality and cultural immortality” (p. 2). As Neo-Victorian Studies investigate exactly such interplay between immersive forms of presentification and self-reflexive historiography, I would have welcomed a clearer discussion of exactly how and why this defies established categorisations.

Cleverly, the collection is opened by Amanda J. Field’s article ‘The Case of Multiplying Millions: Sherlock Holmes in Advertising’, which draws attention to the close interconnection between culture and marketing. Quoting Somerset Maugham’s evaluation that Doyle himself used marketing strategies to anchor Holmes in people’s memories, Field discusses Holmes as a ‘brand’ and, via Roland Barthes’s notion of the ‘code’ (p. 20), focuses on the particular connotations of Holmes as a signifier. A reference to deerstalker, pipe and magnifying glass suffices, as Field shows, to advertise products ranging from honey (drawing on Holmes’s retirement occupation as a beekeeper) to “‘Rexine’ Brand Leathercloth” (which only Holmes’s powers of observation can detect as not actually leather) (p. 28). Holmes functions as a “floating signifier that can be applied at will to different advertising campaigns in different historical situations” (p. 33). However, despite iconic reductions in branding, advertising still relies on a husk of cultural associations and thus on the different historical roles Holmes plays in the cultural imaginary.

Field's contribution is followed up by Neil McCaw's discussion of the Granada adaptations of the Doyle-canon starring Jeremy Brett, which is equally interested in the context of production. 'Sherlock Holmes and a Politics of Adaptation' is based on McCaw's chapter on the Granada production in his monograph *Adapting Detective Fiction* (2010) and provides a very thorough and lucid analysis of the intertwinements between Thatcher politics, the changes brought about by the Broadcasting Act of 1990 and their respective effects on adaptation practices in television productions. Hence the Granada production can be shown to substitute its great emphasis on fidelity at its inception with racier versions of nineteenth-century past in an increasingly market-driven Thatcherite society; the adaptors' confidence in the "Holmesian brand" as the tried and tested market force finally "led to budgets for programmes being slashed and episodes filmed more cheaply than before in an attempt to maximise commercial yield" after the turning point in 1990 (p. 43). McCaw discusses his topic with admirable overview as well as acuity and highlights the ideological inconsistencies in the adaptational uses of the Victorian in the 1980s and 1990s.

Terry Scarborough's contribution "Open the Window, then!" Filmic Interpretation of Gothic Conventions in Brian Mill's *The Hound of the Baskervilles*' leads the focus away from contexts of production to generic concerns and their relevance for interpretation. Focusing on the Granada adaptation of Doyle's novel, Scarborough opens with the impressive thesis that "the contemporary viewer observes Victorian culture and thought from a masterly, panoptic perspective, which remains rooted in the Gothic" (pp. 49-50). The convincing and expert analysis of genre is combined with a spatial and visual mapping of the moor and the metropolis to shed light not only on their Gothic doublings but also on the interconnection between strategies of representation and concerns with socio-cultural constructions of space. The author shows in what ways panoptic and street level views address cultural concerns regarding clear cultural and spatial constructions of 'civilised' and 'uncivilised' spaces.

After the collection has thus far provided a tightly interconnected *tour de force* from advertising via the politics of adaptation and a particular generic case study of a television production, it moves on to broaden the perspective again in 'The Curious Case of the Kingdom of Shadows: The Transmogrification of Sherlock Holmes in the Cinematic Imagination' by

Harvey O'Brian. Whereas Scarborough had explored an adaptation of a text published after the so-called hiatus, O'Brian focuses on the plethora of cinematic versions of Holmes negotiating the detective's afterlives after 'The Final Problem' (1893) and the detective's supposed demise at the Reichenbach Falls. After an insightful introduction to the generic and medial transformations via a discussion of the trick film *Sherlock Holmes Baffled* (1900) and its stop motion-technique, which forms "part of the link between the theatre of the nineteenth century and the development of a continuity system of cinematic narration" (p. 64), the further analyses of the essay fail to provide a typology and verge on a mere enumeration of different cinematic versions. Nevertheless, it is a highly readable and important collection of material and as such indispensable as an overview of the history of appropriations which take Sherlock Holmes as "a point of origin" (p. 64).

After this cinematic exploration, the collection provides another streak of bacon with Claudia Capancioni's 'Sherlock Holmes, Italian Anarchists and Torpedoes: The Case of a Manuscript Recovered in Italy'. While this is an interesting, almost 'exotic' piece in a discussion dominated by Anglo-American cultures, it would have contributed to the overall range and coherence of the edited collection if there had been a subsection dealing with further continental takes on the detective. Without this, the essay seems rather isolated. In the multimedia context, Capancioni's text leads us back to a literary discussion of Joyce Lussu's hitherto untranslated *Sherlock Holmes: anarchi a siluri* (1982), or "anarchists and torpedoes" as the title has it. This novel, described as an "original Italian period apocryphal narrative" (p. 81), follows a typical postmodernist trajectory. Lussu adds a postscript declaring "that her story is in fact based on Holmes's biographical account: she found his journal among the manuscripts and documents of her grandmother, the British novelist Margaret Collier (1846-1928)" (p. 81), and Collier, in her turn, had received it directly from Watson, who felt unable to tell a story revealing Holmes's sympathy for Italian socialists and anarchists, hence leaving it in her care. In contrast to Holmes's very British biographer, Collier takes the liberty to openly address "Holmes's sexuality and his consumption of stimulant drugs" (p. 87) suppressed in Watson's account, as Capancioni argues. Paradoxically, however, Capancioni as well as Lussu suppress Holmes's quite frank and by now iconic predilection for a 'seven-per-cent solution' (Conan Doyle 2007: 97), which Watson discusses

with great medical concern in *The Sign of Four* (1891), to make a mock-revelatory argument. While Lussu's novel seems to be a textbook example of the popular postmodernist blending and blurring of fact and fiction, Capancioni's essay proves an inspiring journey into a different cultural imaginary and into Italian politics of adaptation. Interestingly, however, the author does not comment on the fact that this "apocryphal narrative" (p. 81) seems to require justification by the hands of a decidedly British novelist, Collier, whose stay in Italy seems to have induced her to a more open-minded attitude towards sex and drugs, thus drawing on very British and very Victorian stereotypes of Italy.

One of the editors, Sabine Vanacker, follows up with 'Sherlock's Progress Through History: Feminist Revisions of Holmes', and focuses her analysis on Laurie King and Carole Nelson Douglas to investigate feminist surrogations of the homosocial continuum portrayed in the Doyle canon. The fact that both authors in focus are American seems quite interesting in terms of appropriation practises, as British authors are apparently not inclined to couple the sleuth with a love interest or to rewrite Doyle's stories from a female perspective. A short commentary on the question whether feminist revisions are restricted to a US market would have made a stimulating addition to the piece. Vanacker's aim is to "consider these feminist revisions of the Holmes myth using the critical perspective developed for the collaborative, democratic and ever-open phenomenon of fan-fiction and other so-called 'archontic' literature" (p. 95). She uses this term derived from Derrida as designating "all fiction committing itself to establishing dialogue with a source text that is culturally central and relevant" (p. 96). While this is an interesting approach that facilitates thought-provoking readings, it seems to elide crucial differences established within adaptation studies and the wider context of rewriting that cannot be done away with without loss: the distinctions between different kinds of referentiality such as revision and rewriting, pastiche and parody, adaptation and appropriation are vital to analyse the particular ways contemporary products deal with cultural memory. The article also betrays a contradictory stance towards fan fiction: on the one hand, it is idealised as "democratic" and "ever-open" (p. 95), but on the other, value hierarchies remain in place as fan-fiction is derived from "master text[s]" such as those within the Doyle canon (p. 96). Besides, King's Mary Russell series and Douglas's Irene Adler series are said to provide "an even more radical transformation"

than fan fiction by presenting “the Holmes world as a woman-centred universe” (p. 95). This, in its turn, strikes me as slightly reductionist regarding the plethora of fan fiction focusing on Holmes’s possible sexualities, and is further undercut by the remark that “King introduces clear overtones of an (unfeminist) old-fashioned romance – the world’s most hegemonic man falling for a sixteen-year old girl” (p. 99). Regarding the history of feminism and gender studies, one could also further problematise the claim that “King and Douglas seek to ‘correct’ certain aspects of the Holmes myth, disentangling it from the late-Victorian ideology to which it subscribes and which it naturalises, giving it a woman-friendly, modestly liberal feminist tendency” (p. 97); the latter stance would require another turn of the screw in terms of ideology criticism. In the context of neo-Victorianism, Vanacker nonetheless makes a very strong and convincing point about King and Douglas’s respective series constituting but two examples of a wider project “involv[ing] a representation of the (late-)Victorian period as productive of the modern world, almost using the Victorian age as an explanatory origin myth for the complex modern world of the millennial society” (p. 102).

From feminist revisions, the readers’ attention is now turned to another aspect of multimedia afterlives – the videogame – in Souvik Mukherjee’s ‘Sherlock Holmes Reloaded: Holmes, Videogames and Multiplicity’. He highlights the fact that videogames can be understood as “narratives where the *telos* or ‘ending’ keeps changing” (p. 109) and argues that “Sherlock Holmes keeps being ‘reloaded’ and replayed – almost like a videogame” (p. 110). Professing his discontent with structuralist narratologies’ ability to cope with such multiplicity, he instead recommends Deleuze’s approach “to view the multi-telic as being various actualisations of virtual possibility” (p. 116). While the videogame is certainly of vital interest for the edited collection, there are some points that could have been dealt with more clearly, for instance the question of genre. An overview of the different genres of gaming in which Sherlock Holmes thrives is not provided. While the adventure game is mentioned – certainly the most central genre as it provides the opportunity to step into Holmes’s footsteps as detective (to ‘play Holmes’) – it would have been interesting to read whether Holmes does or does not lend himself to ego-shooters, life simulation games or other genres. As regards theory, a more comprehensive discussion of game studies would have been of advantage. Mukherjee

exclusively draws on Janet Murray's discussion of "whether videogames [are] purely games or whether they [are] stories as well"; although her approach is dismissed as "being too extreme" (p. 110), this does not justify a levelling of game and narrative. This, in its turn, touches upon another issue, namely the question whether structuralist narratology particularly lends itself to explore games in the first place. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this particular approach does not prove helpful for games – or, does it? Gérard Genette's system would at least provide concepts such as "order" and "frequency" to analyse structures of plot and how many times and from which perspectives a story is told (Genette 1988: p. 21, 38), clearly relevant to the author's insistence on employing *structuralist narratology* to analyse multiplicity in videogames.

Bran Nicol returns to the question of adaptations in cinema and TV. In 'Sherlock Holmes Version 2.0: Adapting Doyle in the Twenty-First Century' he mainly explores Guy Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes* and the BBC production *Sherlock*. Discussing both as "crime thrillers", he contends that "the suspense is accompanied by a focus on Holmes's own tendency towards what we might call 'sociopathology'" and "that this combination invites a response from viewers which is itself curiously 'sociopathological' in its attitude to the characters on screen" (p. 125). Nicol straddles generic questions with an analysis of audiences and thus supplements the previous film analyses. Sweeping generalisations such as "[o]ur culture instinctively finds the excessive abilities and personality traits of a man like Holmes suspicious at best, and dangerous at worst" (p. 128) aside, the author sheds light on many interesting aspects of these very successful versions of Holmes. He argues for example, that Ritchie's film tames Holmes's intellect by signposting his "physical bravery and skill" (p. 129), visually offering them to the viewer's gaze by drawing on representational strategies derived from videogames. Ranking Holmes amongst "the noir private eye rather than the gentleman detective" (p. 131), Ritchie is held to Americanise the icon of Englishness. The BBC's *Sherlock*, in contrast, is classified as "the symptom of the postmodern age of production" (p. 134) drawing on Baudrillard. What is noteworthy about this contribution is its tendency to pathologise Holmes as well as his audiences. Nicol offers the diagnosis that the "extreme pleasure Cumberbatch's Holmes takes from the thought process is clearly not normal" (p. 138), and that viewers internalise his lack of empathy. The author concludes by stating that "the crime thriller is

typified by an attitude of cold disregard”, a clear disadvantage as compared to the nineteenth century realist novel “once valued for the ‘love’ which conditioned the empathetic approach to characters by both author and reader” (p. 139). Hence the article’s thought-provoking insights are hampered by an obvious nostalgia for the past and the problematic short-circuiting of generic choices and consumer reactions.

With the next article, the collection moves on to explore the multimedia-afterlives of Arthur Conan Doyle and shifts the emphasis from the character to the author. Andrew Lycett’s ‘The Strange Case of the Scientist Who Believed in Fairies’ focuses on Doyle’s biography. Tracing Conan Doyle’s career from his early training as a medical student – for example under Joseph Bell, the model for Sherlock Holmes – in the Edinburgh context of the Scottish Enlightenment to Doyle becoming a supporter of spiritualism, Lycett particularly highlights the First World War and the death of Doyle’s first wife as vital turning points. Thereafter, Doyle gave up his scientific detachment and attempted to speak with the dead. The article not only provides biographical facts relevant for the following analyses of Doyle as character in literary and filmic adaptations, but also introduces the reader to nineteenth-century explorations of psychology, mesmerism, hypnotism and telepathy, and their institutional contexts, for example regarding the Society for Psychical Research.

In ‘Channelling the Past: *Arthur & George* and the Neo-Victorian Uncanny’, Patricia Pulham moves on to explore Doyle’s role in Julian Barnes’s *Arthur & George* (2005). Drawing on *Haunting and Spectrality* (2010), which she co-edited with Rosario Arias, Pulham explores Barnes’s “neo-historical biofiction” in the context of neo-Victorianism, arguing that the novel is best understood as an example of a comparatively new genre “fusing fact and fiction” (p. 155). It is centred on the intertwining life stories of Doyle and George Edalji, who “was found guilty and condemned to seven years’ penal servitude for mutilating cattle” (p. 155). Pulham intends to “identify the ‘ideological concerns’” of the novel, by

consider[ing] *Arthur & George* in the context of the detective novel, biofiction, spiritualism, and the neo-historical novel, while pointing at Barnes’s implicit interest in and deployment of the Freudian uncanny, invoked in the novel via allusions to blindness, doublings, and spectrality. (p. 156)

The article brings together a broad range of approaches and genres, and ends on a rather disquieting note, arguing that historiography is fraught with trauma: “any engagement with the past is a potentially castrative process”, and “its blinds and our own blind spots will continually affect our ability to resurrect it” (p. 168). This is an insight that reiterates a fact long established in the discipline of history, namely that we cannot know the past directly, that we depend on sources and tinge them with our culturally specific interpretations, and envisions it from the point of view of psychoanalysis. Pulham puts forth a very complex line of argument and touches upon an appealing psychological dynamics centred around and rooted in the Freudian ‘primal scene’ to explain processes of memory construction as well as literary production and reception. As this is a rather ambitious theme for a contribution to an edited collection, readers may hope that she will return to it in more detail in her future work.

In ‘Arthur Conan Doyle’s Appearances as a Detective in Historical Crime Fiction’, Jennifer S. Palmer follows up on Pulham’s contribution by elaborating on the “history-mystery genre”, among which she counts Barnes’s *Arthur & George* along with A.S. Byatt’s *Possession* (1990), for instance. Palmer also focuses on fact-fiction blurring and explores the question whether a real historical figure can, in fact, “be employed fictionally” (p. 170). She provides a helpful typology of texts by twelve authors (among them David Pirie, Gyles Brandreth, Roberta Rogow, and Graham Moore) and categorises them according to the ways in which Conan Doyle is himself turned into a detective in historical crime fiction. She concludes on a somewhat puzzling note that Doyle “almost merges with his creation in cultural memory” (p. 182), while also “becoming as powerful an icon as his famous creation” (p. 183). Regarding the structure of the collection as a whole, this article might have been positioned directly after Lycett’s contribution on biography as its typology would have provided a neater framework for the essays dealing with particular texts.

Clive Bloom concludes the edited collection with ‘Sherlock Holmes in Fairyland: The Afterlife of Arthur Conan Doyle’. Judging from the title, this contribution seems to be concerned with similar issues to Lycett’s biographical essay that addresses the reasons why Doyle developed an avid interest in fairies. However, Bloom instead explores the intricate interrelations between detective fiction, the character Sherlock Holmes, its author and the wider cultural context of Victorian “isms” such as anarchism,

---

socialism and social Darwinism (see pp. 184-185). Holmes's cultural function, he argues, is to serve as "the high priest of stability in a destabilised world" (p. 185). Bloom contextualises both Doyle's and Holmes's afterlives in a "'new' ideology of death", in which the dead are the constant companions of the living (p. 188). Within this cultural framework, Doyle attempts to reconcile materialism and spiritualism so as to found a new worldview in which life after death seems possible – a reconciliation that would actually render Holmes redundant: "the final problem, finally solved" (p. 196), as Bloom concludes. He thus provides a fine last line for this collection which, in spite of some idiosyncrasies in structure and theorisation, will likely prove indispensable for anyone exploring the traces, adaptations and appropriations of the writer and the consulting detective.

### **Bibliography**

- Dickens, Charles. 2011. *The Complete Works of Charles Dickens*. Delphi Classics, Kindle Edition.
- Doyle, Arthur Conan. 2007. *The Complete Stories of Sherlock Holmes*. London: Wordsworth Library Collection.
- Drabble, Margaret (ed.). 2000. *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, revised sixth edition. Oxford et al.: Oxford University Press.
- Genette, Gérard. 1988. *Narrative Discourse Revisited* (trans. Jane E. Lewin). Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

