

## Dressing and Undressing Sherlock Holmes: A Study in Costumes

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### **Abstract:**

The present article provides insight into the uses and functions of selected costumes in the BBC television series *Sherlock* (2010), analysing clothes as part of re-enacted fetish performances, in which gender roles are investigated or questioned in order to cope with cultural fears and anxieties. Drawing upon specific studies on fashion, clothing fetishism and visual culture, I explore the representational politics of the clothes of the detective and various icons of femininity, including the dominatrix, wife, bride, and sister. It will become clear that clothes actively participate in the act of reliving the past, highlighting conflicts related to a construction of identities that is suspended between past and present.

**Keywords:** adaptation, clothing fetishism, costumes, fashion, gender studies, performativity, period costumes, psychoanalysis, Sherlock Holmes, visual culture.

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The BBC television series *Sherlock* (2010), created by Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat, uses selected costumes as part of fetish performances, which implicitly interrogate and deconstruct both past and current gender roles. More precisely, I will argue that such enactments, strongly focusing on the role of iconic ‘historical’ costumes, materialise the protagonist’s struggle to mediate between the heritage of Victorian gender constructions and postmodern identities. By appealing to specific studies on fashion, clothing fetishism and visual culture, I analyse the way in which characters with the potential to free themselves from stereotyped representations must nonetheless refer to them by adopting costumes that directly engage with Victorian values and ideals, cultural icons and genre clichés. This process of citation and allusion aligns with what Julie Sanders calls the “impulse towards intertextuality”, which “is regarded by many as a central tenet of postmodernism” (Sanders 2016: 33). Accordingly, fetishised clothes evoke performances wherein the Victorian past is both summoned and exorcised,

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in parallel with the protagonist's apparent recovery from childhood traumas. In such contexts, the garment functions as both gender and ritual fetish, where 'gender' substitutes for the 'sexual' thus shifting the focus from genitalia and their functions to the representation of gender politics. To make this argument, I focus on clothes worn by the figure of the detective and various icons of femininity, including the dominatrix, wife, bride, and sister.

### 1. "Re-membering" Victorian Clothes

The most recent revivals of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's literary canon have launched a new golden age for Sherlockiana. After the release on screen of Guy Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes* in 2009, updated rewritings have followed one another, including re-imaginings in the twenty-first century, such as the BBC television series *Sherlock*,<sup>1</sup> starring Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman as Holmes and Watson respectively. This modernised adaptation demonstrates a particular interest in the psychological characterisation of Sherlock Holmes, who often defines himself as a 'high-functioning sociopath', and solves crimes for the sake of his own ego. Accordingly, the series' adaptors highlight the detective's emotional world and progressively reveal the existence of a traumatic past. The series also plays with queer subtexts, teasing viewers, but never providing confirmation, as to the possibility of a homosexual as well as homoerotic relationship developing between Sherlock and his fellow investigator John Watson. The persistent focus on male intimacy, in all its possible declensions, significantly affects the representation of the canon's female characters, who struggle to find their own place in the face of this updating process. As a result, the whole series' gender politics become mired in ambiguity, ironically depicting a condition where "The Future Is Then; The Past Is Now" (Basu 2012: 212).

*Sherlock's* costumes render the series' equivocation as regards the visual construction of gender clearly visible, continuing a trend of prior adaptations of Conan Doyle's works. As Alan Johnson observes,

[w]hile Holmes is routinely represented on both stage and on-screen with a deerstalker, Inverness cape, and calabash pipe, none of these symbols originate in Conan Doyle's writing. Indeed, the Sherlock Holmes of the original 56 stories and four novellas wore very little clothing, or, at least,

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very little clothing that we are told about. (Johnson 2014: 116)

Johnson adds that both deerstalker and Inverness Cape were first brought on stage in 1899 by the American actor-manager William Gillette, who took inspiration from Sidney Paget's illustrations of Conan Doyle's stories in the *Strand Magazine* (Johnson 2014: 115-116). Conan Doyle himself emphasised the importance of clothes in Holmes' investigations despite providing scant descriptions of his detective's own apparel. For instance, in 'A Study in Scarlet' (1887), Holmes claims, "[b]y a man's finger-nails, by his coat-sleeve, by his boot, by his trouser-knees, by the callosities of his forefinger and thumb, by his expression, by his shirt-cuffs—by each of these things a man's calling is plainly revealed" (Conan Doyle 1989: 17). Accordingly, Watson is rather impressed when Holmes easily deduces his position as a military doctor and the identity of one of his clients, a marine sergeant (see Conan Doyle 1989: 18-19). For Holmes, garments are the expression of a character's personality and of fixed or stereotyped identities. Both Holmes' client and Watson, for instance, belong to specific categories of men (the military man and the doctor) whose costumes and traits became popular in fetish fantasies. Valerie Steele specifies that uniforms, as well as the figure of the doctor, "frequently symbolize authority, evoking fantasies of dominance and submission" (Steele 1996: 321-325). Similarly, the Inverness Cape visualises prominent features of Holmes' profession. In the nineteenth century, as Doreen Yarwood observes,

[t]here were overcoats for smart town wear, for warmth while travelling and riding, for informal leisure purposes and for protection from different degrees of cold and wet. Among the heavy coats designed for warmth in bad weather and travelling was the *Inverness coat* or *cape*, named after the Scottish city. This garment, of the second half of the century, was generally made of tweed or check or plaid cloth. It was long and full, belted, had a collar and an elbow-length cape which could be detachable. Sometimes the garment had sleeves, sometimes not; it could be cut as a cloak or a coat. (Yarwood 2011: 308, original italics)

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By combining elegance, comfort, and implicit status, this particular piece of clothing lends Holmes a sophisticated air, while simultaneously hinting at the detective's active outdoor life.

*Sherlock's* adaptors keep this iconic reference but adapt the garment to modern taste. Benedict Cumberbatch's silhouette is thus emphasised by the structured double-breasted design of a Belstaff 'Milford' coat, whose main characteristic is a strong upturned collar. The coat is featured in the 'Wardrobe' section of the fan portal *Sherlockology*, where it is described as "made from pure Irish wool tweed bonded with a sophisticated, ultra-light microporous film, to make it waterproof without altering the natural qualities of comfort and breathability" (*Sherlockology* n.d.). It is also stated that the garment became popular among fans of the series and "the Belstaff Milford was reissued in a new colour and cut in late 2015" (*Sherlockology* n.d.). The official Belstaff website repeatedly mentions *Sherlock*, confirming Sarah Gilligan's observations that "[c]ostume, fashion and merchandising enable the formation of 'tactile transmediality' for the spectator by bridging the gap between the virtual 'worlds' on-screen and the lived material body" (Gilligan 2012: 25). Additionally, I want to propose, these interconnections facilitate a sort of 'transtemporality' between the material and re-imagined past.

It is important to remark that the Belstaff 'Milford' coat had been originally selected by costume designer Ray Holman for the series' pilot, before Sarah Arthur permanently took on the *Sherlock* project (Morris 2016). The garment thus reveals stylistic continuity with the costumes Holman designed for *Dr Who* (2005)<sup>2</sup> and *Torchwood* (2006), with pronounced vintage references. Captain Jack Harkness' greatcoat in *Torchwood*, in particular, recalls the military style of the 1940s (Forrest 2016) and, as specified on Belstaff's website, the appeal of *Sherlock's* refashioned 'Milford' coat similarly stems from the fact that it "blends heritage design with functionality" by "[d]rawing on the popular thirties Military Style Trench for inspiration" (Belstaff n.d.). Put differently, fashion 'updates' the past for the present's own consumerist self-fashioning.

In addition to being a "neo-Victorian reimagining of the Inverness cape" (Johnson 2014: 119), the military style of the 'Milford' coat carries traditionally masculine connotations related to ideals of authority, power, and protection. *Sherlock's* relationship with this signifier, however, is complicated by the fact that, as Anissa M. Graham and Jennifer C. Garlen

underline, “Sir Arthur Conan Doyle never intended for Sherlock Holmes to be a figure of romance” (Graham and Garlen 2012: 31). Nonetheless, the internalisation of the “Brainy-is-the-new-sexy” motto in the drama (McGuigan 2012: 0:26:48-0:26:50) ends up sexualising both the coat and the detective figure. This invites further reflection upon the possibility of considering the coat as a neo-Victorian fetish symbol of masculinity.

Gilligan believes that although the coat is presented as a fetish object, classical notions of fetishism as a phallogentric practice, which displaces sexual desire onto a substitute and marginalises female desire, are not enough to explain how fetishism works in *Sherlock* (Gilligan 2013: 140-141). For instance, Gilligan observes that Sherlock’s coat “is not constructed from a conventionally ‘fetishistic’ material”, such as leather or PVC, and “[t]he layers of fabric upon the hard body can be seen to mix both vulval and phallic imagery, constructing Sherlock [. . .] as an androgynous image made up of both male and female signifiers (Gilligan 2013: 141, 140). Instead what arguably complicates the representation of the coat (and other iconic clothes in the series) is the self-reflective neo-Victorian tension between past and present. In this regard, Helen Davies observes that the act of “re-membering” the Victorians encompasses the philological consideration of the Latin term ‘member’, which originally indicated both male and female genitalia (Davies 2015: 8). Consequently, Davies claims that “‘re-membering’ the Victorians also suggests reimagining them as gendered and sexualised subjects, drawing attention to the genitalia, and to uses to which it might be put” (Davies 2015: 8). At the same time “re-membering” also entails bringing to mind collective social images (i.e. stereotypes) and potentially re-locating their meanings, which in the case of images of dress can deconstruct – but also reinscribe – essentialised gender roles. Iconic costuming thus functions akin to canonical literary works in the process of adaptation as an act of recycling, which “appears both to require and to perpetuate the existence of a canon, although it may in turn contribute to its ongoing reformulation and expansion” (Sanders 2016: 25). However, the extent to which Sherlock manages to ‘reformulate’ and ‘expand’ conceptions of gender through recycled ‘Victorian’ costumes remains to be seen.

In line with the fact that, as Kelley Graham reminds us, “Victorians showed remarkable thrift in their reuse of clothing and it is surprising how rarely anyone got clothes which were truly new” (Graham 2008: 45), several

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costumes in *Sherlock* are connoted as vintage or come from older collections. Considering the amount of intertextual references in *Sherlock*'s clothes' discourse, desire stems not only from the fetishised object (here the item of citational 'Victorian' dress), but also from "the tension between the familiar and the new, and the recognition of both similarity and differences" within the act of citation (Sanders 2016: 31). This is how fetish desire, in relation to neo-Victorian clothes, can be integrated into "the ongoing experiences of pleasure for the reader or spectator in tracing the intertextual relationships" of the adapted work (Sanders 2016: 46). Accordingly, if it is true that as Philippa Gates states, "[d]etective heroes offer audiences models of an ideal manhood but they also reflect changing social attitudes towards masculinity" (Gates 2004: 216), analysing the relationship between Sherlock and his re-imagined coat – and by extension, between other characters and their clothes – means reflecting upon the links between fashion signifiers and their shifting meanings vis-à-vis gender in the twenty-first century.

## **2. Dressing and Undressing the Detective and 'The Woman'**

Explicit or implicit fetish behaviours repeatedly feature in *Sherlock*, particularly in Season 2, Episode 1, 'A Scandal in Belgravia' (2012), which focuses on dress, 'dressing up', and states of undress. The episode loosely takes its inspiration from Conan Doyle's story 'A Scandal in Bohemia' (1891), published in *The Strand*, in which Sherlock Holmes, much to his surprise, finds his brilliant equal in the adventuress Irene Adler. Nicknamed "the woman" (Conan Doyle 1989: 117, original emphasis), Irene is described as having "the face of the most beautiful of women, and the mind of the most resolute of men" (Conan Doyle 1989: 122), establishing her as gender ambiguous. The statement, which associates the thinking process with the male mind, might have been considered by *Sherlock*'s adaptors as the most perfect expression of Victorian phallocentrism – which may account for Irene's on-screen transformation into a fetish dominatrix.

The term 'fetishism' appeared for the first time in 1886, described by Richard Von Krafft-Ebing as "[t]he Association of Lust with the Idea of Certain Portions of the Female Person, or with Certain Articles of Female Attire" (Krafft-Ebing 2013: 218). Generally speaking, but not always the case, it is believed that "[t]he fetish allays the castration anxiety that results from the little boy's discovery that his mother, believed to lack nothing, has

no penis” (Burgin 1996: 82). Fetishism is based on the difference between the ‘penis’ and the ‘phallus’ as physical genital and symbolic signifier respectively. Indeed, drawing upon the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan, Steele explains that “[w]hereas the penis is a part of the male body that may or may not be especially impressive, the phallus is the eternally erect and massive symbol of power and potency” (Steele 1996: 37). In *Sherlock*, the detective’s fetishised coat, celebrated on screen as part of his enigmatic sex appeal, thus becomes a phallic sign of masculine superiority challenged by Irene.

Before the Italian fashion designer Gianni Versace ventured into the S&M aesthetic in the 1990s, the fashion photographer Helmut Newton had already brought clothing fetishism into the spotlight (Steele 1996: 298, 71). Interestingly, Irene’s outfits often evoke Newton’s style. For instance, when the character is first introduced to viewers, the scene vividly recalls *Two Pairs of Legs in Black Stockings, Paris, 1979* (Lagerfeld and Newton 1982: 33; see <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/helmut-newton-two-pairs-of-legs-in-black-stockings-paris>). The picture features an out-of-focus man and the legs of two women in fetish garments, holding hands behind their back. Similarly, in *Sherlock* the camera focuses on the transparent black lace and lingerie of Irene’s waist and legs. She also holds a whip, and the few lines in the script – “Have you been wicked, Your Highness?” (McGuigan 2012: 0:03:38-0:03:41) – suggest she will shortly perform fetish homosexual intercourse. Pertinently, although Irene ‘comes out’ as a lesbian later in the series, she never provides insight into female intimacy. As accentuated by her fetishised costume, she merely serves to mediate male desire, while *Sherlock* renders lesbian desire as immaterial to the on-screen ‘action’.

In the nineteenth century, lesbian discourse fell within the remit of the unspeakable. As Ornella Moscucci notes, “resistance to the idea that women were capable of transgressing the norms of sexual behaviour resonated in the different treatment of male and female homosexuality in the Victorian era” (Moscucci 1996: 74). A few neo-Victorian works such as the controversial figures of lesbian servants in Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca* (1938) and Sarah Waters’ *Affinity* (1999) address this topic by recycling imagery of invisibility. Angela Calleya Dan suggests that these works “share the perturbing spectral presence of the female servant who apart from being an ambiguous character playing with (in)visibility, controls both history and story” (Calleya Dan 2017).<sup>3</sup> Put differently, their invisibility is

inscribed in their domestic uniforms – another kind of costume – that ‘encode’ their roles and identity as surely as does the ‘deciphered’ dress of Conan Doyle’s military men. With regard to costumes, Steele remarks that “[t]he maid is an obviously submissive role, which indicates the power differential implicit in traditional gender stereotypes” that exercised significant appeal over Victorian (male) imaginations: in nineteenth-century brothels, for example, “[t]he maid [...] was not virgin but victim, sexually servicing her master” (Steele 1996: 310). Initially at least, *Sherlock* appears to invert this hierarchy through Irene’s masterful rather than subservient figuration as a dominatrix.

Overtly performative and self-reflective, Irene’s costume materialises the will to ‘punish’ wealthy and powerful clients. The fetish game, however, proves illusory, and plays out ambiguous dynamics between servants and slaves, since the seemingly empowered lesbian ‘services’ men’s desires. Hence the representation of female homosexuality in *Sherlock* can be compared to Newton’s art, especially his collection *World without Men* (1984). The title is deceiving: by underlining male absence rather than female presence, it draws even more attention to the man behind the camera, reducing female intimacy to a male fantasy that seems to hide a secret desire to identify with the female body. This identification should not be considered as a pretext for further exploitations of the female body, though. Instead, it may help the male subject to relieve stress deriving from the performance of masculinity and sex (implicit is the formulation: ‘if I *am* the woman, I do not have to perform sex *with* the woman’). The predominance of hypersexualised bodies thus ultimately diverts attention from the real object of attention, namely male anxiety. Indeed, at times Newton’s art specifically foregrounds the role of the male photographer/voyeur. For instance, his photograph *Self-portrait with Wife June and Models, Vogue Studio, Paris, 1981* (Newton 1987: pl. 14; see <http://www.artnet.com/artists/helmut-newton/self-portrait-with-june-and-models-vogue-studio-KQNNaV4r2j1KCGyyLuSuxA2>) displays the self-reflective appearance of the photographer’s persona in the mirror that stands in front of the portrayed model. Commenting upon this picture, Victor Burgin highlights that Newton wears a raincoat:

A voyeur in a raincoat? The photographer is here both a voyeur *and* an exhibitionist [...]. Who else wears a raincoat?



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A detective – like the one who, in all those old B-movies, investigates all those old dangerously mysterious young women. Following her, watching her until, inevitably, the *femme* proves *fatale*. (Burgin 1996: 81-82, original emphasis)

Burgin here recalls the association between the coat, the objectifying photographer, and perverts who expose their genitalia to women, remarking certain similarities between detectives and stalkers. Similar associations can be found in *Sherlock*, since the detective's tendency to show off his brilliant deductions is his most prominent personality trait. In fact, on several occasions he behaves like a stalker, applying his 'penetrating' intellect to women akin to Newton's camera for a sort of self-masturbatory satisfaction.

As opposed to the perverse exhibitionist, however, Sherlock's attitude towards his detective's clothes is less straightforward. At the beginning of 'A Scandal in Belgravia', Sherlock steps into Buckingham Palace with his naked body lazily wrapped in a blanket. When John asks amusedly whether he is wearing "any pants", after carefully staring at his friend's hips (McGuigan 2012: 0:14:41-0:14:44), the focus shifts from Sherlock's lazy attitude to his genitalia. The dialogue continues as follows:

JOHN: Here to see the Queen?

SHERLOCK: Oh, apparently yes.

(McGuigan 2012: 0:15:13-0:15:17)

The pun on 'queen' is meant to announce the arrival of Sherlock's brother Mycroft, who, asks Sherlock to put his "trousers on" (McGuigan 2012: 0:15:41-0:15:47), again associating the detective's clothes with the lower body and private parts. As Mycroft is literally asking Sherlock to 'put his phallus on' in front of his (male) client, Sherlock's performance as detective would, by extension, provide a demonstration of Mycroft's own power and influence. By playing Mycroft, after all, Mark Gatiss underlines his double role as actor and adaptor, taking the liberty of dressing and undressing Sherlock Holmes for his own purposes – and the titillation of his audience hoping to see the iconic 'Victorian' detective in the nude. As Sherlock refuses to accede to his brother's patronising request, Mycroft holds the edge of the blanket, so that when Sherlock turns around to leave, the blanket falls and viewers catch a glimpse of his bottom. While in this episode

“Holmes’s nudity on screen is played for laughs” and “as a sign of non-conformism” (Primorac 2013: 102), it also emphasises Sherlock’s self-reflective unwillingness to wear the detective’s clothes when this involves being patronised and manipulated as a sex symbol in his brother’s power games. Paradoxically, Sherlock’s nakedness – as a refusal to serve as ‘maid’ to the desires of the would-be ‘master’ – empowers him.

When the time of the meeting with Irene Adler finally comes, *the* woman shows up completely naked, so that the detective has nothing to deduce from her clothes. The scene thus implicitly mirrors and ‘cites’ the earlier scene of Sherlock’s nakedness as power. In disjuncture with her role, however, Irene’s silhouette as dominatrix is shaped around the lack of the corset, in spite of the fact that

it is more common for [the dominatrix] to be almost completely covered by a second skin [...]. Her entire body, in other words, is transformed into an armoured phallus. High-heeled shoes, boots, and gloves are obvious phallic symbols, as is the whip or riding crop that she often carries. In addition, the dominatrix often wears a corset, which is also a phallic symbol [...]. (Steele 1996: 306)

The lack of the corset leads to contrasting outcomes. While “[a] corseted person stands erect”, and Irene’s body dominates the sitting Sherlock, she rejects that most typical garment of Victorian female fashion, which “has been interpreted as an instrument of physical oppression and sexual commodification” (Steele 1996: 306, 100). Again, we may discern a mirroring of Sherlock’s earlier refusal to don the detective’s costume. So far, they are equal.

The reshaping of the corset introduced more comfortable clothes for women at the end of the Victorian Age (see Presley 1998: 311). By freeing herself from the dominatrix’s corset, Irene evokes the nineteenth-century ‘New Woman’, but also the work of contemporary artists like Newton who, during the 1980s and the 1990s, equated the ‘liberated’ female body with unashamed nudity, with voyeuristic overtones. Irene, who offers her naked body to Sherlock while wearing a red lipstick and a pair of high-heeled Louboutin shoes, thus brings to mind the models portrayed by Helmut

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Newton in the *Big Nudes* series (1981). At the same time, however, Steele remarks that

[c]lothing itself is generally associated with power, and nakedness with its lack. Just as the dominatrix is usually fully clothed, so is the male master. By contrast, the slave, bottom, masochist, or submissive is often (although not inevitably) stripped naked or reduced to wearing clothing that exposes breasts, buttocks, and/or genitals. (Steele 1996: 309)

Moreover, the power dynamics of nakedness are also implicitly gendered, as remarked in Angela Carter's re-imagining of the relationship between Charles Baudelaire and his mistress, Jeanne Duval in her neo-Victorian biofiction, 'Black Venus' (1985). As the short story's narrator stresses, man and his "masculine impedimenta of frock coat (exquisitely cut); white shirt (pure silk, London tailored); oxblood cravat; and impeccable trousers" embody the legitimate "artful [...] creation of culture"; accordingly, "his skin is his own business" and no one else's (Carter 2006: 240) – as in the scene of Sherlock's nudity in Buckingham Palace. In contrast, woman is identified with material nature "and is, therefore, fully dressed in no clothes at all, her skin is common property", to be dominated and exploited by male 'creators' and condemned as "the most abominable of artifices" (Carter 2006: 240). Read as indicative of both essentialised nature and duplicitous artifice, Irene's 'liberated' nakedness in the *Sherlock* series takes on more problematic connotations.

By eliminating the corset, Irene plays both master and slave, empowered gendered subject and sexualised object presented for the viewers' titillation. On the one hand, this may cause what Primorac defines as the

the blatant and much overlooked loss of Victorian female characters' agency that takes place in the process of 'updating' Victorian texts in contemporary screen adaptations through the – now almost routine – 'sexing up' of the proverbially prudish Victorians. (Primorac 2013: 90)

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In this sense, Irene's sexed up 'costume' of fetishised dress and nakedness, like that of Sherlock, implicitly recycle stereotypes of nineteenth-century gender hierarchies and inequality. On the other hand,

accounts by SM adherents uniformly stress that the slave figure is very often the one 'really' in command – indeed, often quite bossy: “Do it harder! Don't stop! Not like that, like this!” The real question may not be Who wields the whip? but rather Who pays? Or: whose fantasy is this? (Steele 1996: 310)

In parallel with neo-Victorianism's ambiguous tension between past and present, Steele's qualification highlights the ambivalent representation of master and slave, clothed and naked bodies, always potentially subordinated, in the performative game, to the money and fantasies of the film and television industry – which, paradoxically, may end up endorsing rather than contesting antiquated gender roles.

Yet if Irene's position as prostitute weakens the series' representation of women, Sherlock's role, being equally tied to the fetishistic desires of adaptors and fans (the latter are given a fantasy they actually pay for) proves little better. Burgin's criticism on Newton's art allows a more detailed understanding of men's and specifically Sherlock's position in the fetish performance. Commenting on the previously mentioned *Self-portrait with Wife June and Models*, Burgin notices that

[Newton's] raincoat opens at the front to form a shadowy delta, from which has sprung this tensely erect and gleamingly naked woman, this coquette. The photographer has flashed his prick, and it turns out to be a woman. (Burgin 1996: 81)

Similarly, Sherlock sneaks into Irene's house in the disguise of a virginal vicar. What he wears, however, is the 'Milford' coat that qualifies him as detective, perverse exhibitionist, and stalker. Since Sherlock cannot use his deductive process against Irene, the game becomes physical, and Irene's naked body becomes a phallic surrogate of the penis, suggesting Sherlock's potential 'queer' identification with the female body itself. Feeling

uncomfortable, Sherlock offers the woman his coat, so that “[h]er playing at being a detective herself takes place symbolically” (Primorac 2013: 102). This action is meant to bring the match up to an intellectual level, in order to avoid sexual implications. Indeed, when Sherlock realises, at the end of the episode, that Irene succumbed to her own feelings for him, the detective’s reaction is cold and ruthless: feelings render the game too dangerous for a man who rejects both emotion and physical intimacy that presumably involve the exhibition of the real penis, which Sherlock rather transforms into a ‘phallic’ deductive process. Fittingly, the end of the series reveals that Sherlock’s concerns about genital sexuality hide a fear of any kind of intimacy as a consequence of a childhood trauma (discussed below).

*Sherlock*’s episode ‘A Scandal in Belgravia’ illustrates the notions that costumes as fetish objects are “part of an elaborate erotic drama” and that fetishists “tend to be intensely ‘penis-focused’” (Steele 1996: 297, 82) – even when neo-Victorian women seem to dominate the screen. The episodes thus enact a male fantasy where gender roles are played out and (superficially) subverted or ‘queered’ to cope with (male) anxieties. The fetish game, however, proves dangerous for male voyeurs. In the same *Self-portrait with Wife June and Models* discussed by Burgin, the small figure of the photographer projected on the mirror (that materialises the male fantasy of fetishised women’s bodies) is literally trapped between monumental female figures: the objectifying voyeur is overwhelmed by his created images. Something similar happens to Sherlock, whose relationship with his coat as fetish becomes increasingly problematic. In Season 2, Episode 2, ‘The Hounds of Baskerville’ (2012), for instance, when Sherlock’s deductions about his client Henry are confirmed, John remarks, “You’re just showing off.”, to which Sherlock replies, “Of course. I am a show-off. That’s what we do” (McGuigan 2012: 0:09:34-0:09:37). Later in the episode, John returns to the topic:

JOHN: Oh, please, can we not do this, this time?

SHERLOCK: Do what?

JOHN: You being all mysterious with your cheekbones and turning your coat collar up so you look cool.

SHERLOCK: I don’t do that.

JOHN: Yeah you do. (McGuigan 2012: 0:31:20-0:31:33)

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While John supports the sexualisation of the coat, Sherlock is not aware of its sex appeal, instead identifying it with the detective's role as a sociopathic character who solves cases for the sake of his own ego. He remains fixated upon "epistemophilia", a sexual tension arising from the thinking process itself, which, as Bran Nicol explains, constitutes "a normal part of subjectivity, as it is central to children's formative research into sexual identity" (Nicol 2013: 158). Accordingly, given that "epistemophilia might be perversely considered the most *sexualised* aspect of the BBC series" (Nicol 2013: 158; original emphasis), Sherlock's denial of genital sexuality implies a different use of the coat to that of its function for the perverse exhibitionist. It is a matter of fact that during his deductions, Sherlock never shows off his naked body; he "turns his collar up", as John remarks, while his physicality is progressively desexualised. In 'His Last Vow' (2014, S. 3, Ep. 3), when Sherlock is severely injured and plunges into his Mind Palace, he visualises his own naked corpse at the morgue, while just a few moments later, his naked chest is surgically operated on at the hospital. Arguably, his body's increased exposure goes hand in hand with his implicit feminisation. In a deleted scene from the same episode, Sherlock is hospitalised and receives a visit from the villainous Charles Augustus Magnussen, who languidly caresses the patient's hands, whispering: "Oh, I covet your hands, Mr Holmes; though since you've survived, I suppose you get to keep them. Look at them. The musician's hands. An artist's. Or a woman's?" (Lovering, McCarthy and Hurran 2014, S. 3, Ep. 3: 0:00:40-0:01:07). Without the 'protection' of his detective's clothes, Sherlock's body itself becomes fetishised, akin to female bodies.

The process is reiterated in 'The Lying Detective' (2017, S. 4, Ep. 2), where Sherlock finds himself in a similar situation. In order to extract a confession from the serial killer Culverton Smith, Sherlock waits for the man to kill him in the bed of the hospital Smith owns. The detective is fragile and vulnerable in his patient clothing, while the man thoroughly enjoys the almost erotic excitement of killing. He admits to a fixation with the complete objectification as others as a means of possession: "Dead people look like things. I like to make people into things. Then you can own them" (Hurran 2017: 1:11:08-1:11:16). Smith continues, "Maintain eye contact. I like to watch it happen" (Hurran 2017: 1:12:24- 1:12:32). The assault looks like a rape, and the importance of the gaze during the objectifying process, as well as of the resulting power game is underlined.

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When Sherlock does not wear his ‘Milford’ coat, he easily falls prey to male predators, and the detective who objectifies dead bodies is objectified in turn. In Eve Sedgwick’s words, Sherlock becomes the man who “fearing to entrust his relations with patriarchy to a powerless counter, a woman, can himself only be used as a woman, and valued as a woman, by the men with whom he comes into narcissistic relation” (Sedgwick 1985: 169-170). The coat is thus considered as a symbol of masculinity by both female characters, who expect the exhibition of the penis, and male characters, who expect the exhibition of the phallus. Sherlock’s sexual identity, however, appears undefined, and the detective struggles to cope with the coat as a signifier of maleness. This will lead him to start a journey of self-discovery, especially in the special episode ‘The Abominable Bride’ (2016), in which he deliberately re-imagines himself in a Victorian world, where he paradoxically seeks to free himself from such expectations.

### 3. “Who are you?”: Dressing the Wife

When in the third series Sherlock comes back to London after faking his own death, he discovers that John has become engaged to Mary Morstan. The woman appears as a literary character in ‘The Sign of Four’ (1890), where she is described as

a blonde young lady, small, dainty, well gloved, and dressed in the most perfect taste. There was, however, a plainness and simplicity about her costume which bore with it a suggestion of limited means. The dress was a sombre greyish beige, untrimmed and unbraided, and she wore a small turban of the same dull hue, relieved only by a suspicion of white feather in the side. Her face had neither regularity of feature nor beauty of complexion, but her expression was sweet and amiable, and her large blue eyes were singularly spiritual and sympathetic. (Conan Doyle 1989: 67)

Introduced by *Sherlock*’s adaptors in ‘The Empty Hearse’ (2014, S. 3, Ep. 1), she looks intelligent and devoted to John Watson. When viewers can openly see her face, she sits down at the table of a restaurant, wearing a leaf dress from the 2003 spring collection by Matthew Williamson.<sup>4</sup> Both outfit and hairstyle gesture towards the 1920s; as Ann Beth Presley observes, the

V-neck appeared at around that period, when ““Orientalism”” (hinted at through the beaded leaf motifs of Mary’s dress) and “the use of striking colors became major themes”, (Presley 1998: 313). Indeed, Mary’s dress also seems somewhat reminiscent of the 1880s Aestheticism, evoking the bohemian dress and William Morris’s ‘nature’ designs associated with the movement. Akin to the dominatrix’s fetish costume, Mary’s clothing seems intentionally chosen to accentuate her femininity.

As was the case with Irene Adler, however, Mary’s ‘neo-Victorian’ silhouette is characterised primarily by the absence of the typical Victorian S-shaped corset, which began to lose its charm in the early twentieth century (Presley 1998: 311). The female silhouette had changed completely by the 1920s, which represented an “age of emancipation and flux between social classes” that brought new freedoms for women (Presley 1998, 314), including “smok[ing] and drink[ing] in public”, wearing “more alluring clothes”, such as shorter skirts and trousers, and “bar[ing] their legs in public” (Presley 1998: 314).

On the other hand, Penny Tinkler reports that in popular magazines for girls in England, “[i]llustrations of 1920s heroines were [...] very similar to heroines portrayed in late Victorian literature”, and only the 1930s saw the appearance of “a more distinct break with Victorian representations of girlhood” (Tinkler 1995: 74). However, Tinker goes on to stress that even

the often wild representations of the 1930s schoolgirl continued to work a compromise between the fundamental patriarchal concern for girls as servicers of men and as potential wives and mothers and the freedom, challenge and excitement of ‘adolescence’. (Tinkler 1995: 74)

As soon as Mary becomes John’s fiancée, her role as a nurse, subordinated to John, the doctor, is emphasised. It seems indicative of the series’ gender politics that Mary, like Adler, should have been allotted a ‘service’ profession. Pertinently, Steele points out that “the nurse’s uniform derives from that of the housemaid (cap and apron), not the labcoat of the scientist or doctor. For many years, nursing was a very low-paid, low-status female job” (Steele 1996: 325). As a consequence, Mary’s clothes, such as the Double Digits Shirt she wears in ‘The Sign Of Three’ (2014),<sup>5</sup> progressively cover her neckline, perhaps in favour of a certain *bon ton* taste that retrofits



Victorian prudery onto Mary as she approaches marriage. It can be observed that Mary's wedding dress in the same episode, designed by Jane Bourvis,<sup>6</sup> reinforces the *liaison* with the fashion of the 1920s and the 1930s, combining the V-neck and 'Victorianesque' romantic flowers and lace.

Sherlock is clearly disturbed by John's departure from Baker Street but ends up trusting Mary. In 'His Last Vow' (2014), however, John's wife is blackmailed by the villainous Charles Augustus Magnussen and forced to reveal her identity as former killer. She even shoots Sherlock, who has a vision of Mary in her wedding dress. At this point, he recognises his inability to define Mary's 'true' role and, once hospitalised, plunges into his Mind Palace, where Mary appears to him in the vintage outfit she wore in 'The Empty Hearse'. He asks confusedly: "So, Mary Watson, who are you?" (Hurran 2014: 0:44:49-00:44:59). Thinking she might represent a danger for John, he invites the woman to a place called "the empty houses":

They were demolished years ago to make way for the London Underground, a vent for the old steam trains. Only the very front section of the house remains. It's just a façade. Remind you of anyone, Mary? A façade. (Hurran 2014: 0:48:31-0:48:45)

On the exterior walls of the building, a giant picture of Mary in her white dress appears, marking the comparison between Mary's and the building's deceptive appearances. By implication, Mary has used traditional, Victorian-inflected femininity – emphasised through her costuming – as a 'front' to conceal unladylike subversive pursuits that 'demolish' conventional gender roles.

Mary is undeniably a wife, but the only way Sherlock can think of her as such is by naively appealing to the icon of the bride in the white dress. According to Stella Bruzzi's notions of *looking at* and *looking through* costume, films that

choose to look at clothes create an alternative discourse, and one that usually counters or complicates the ostensible strategy of the overriding narrative. When costumes are looked at rather than through, the element conventionally prioritized is their eroticism. (Bruzzi 2002: 247)

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Bruzzi's statement, which originally refers to costume dramas, can be applied to the present case because, as previously explained, *Sherlock's* costumes ambiguously play with temporal tensions, blurring the line between past and present fashions as markers of identity. The vintage quality of Mary's dress draws attention to the construction of fetishised femininity that survives the shift from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century. Sherlock is hurt not because Mary deceived John, but because she betrayed *his* personal expectations of what a wife should be. In other words, the vintage quality of *Sherlock's* costumes complicates the series' sometimes subversive and queer representation of gender roles, highlighting a clash between, on the one hand, the legacies of Victorian values and essentialised gender connotations attached to clothes and, on the other, postmodern plural identities and more androgynous fashions (such as Mary's earlier mentioned Double Digits shirt).

As perhaps *the* epitome of feminine fetishised clothing – functioning as an object of desire for *both* men and woman – the wedding dress in its quintessential white/ivory colour only became the prevalent fashion following Queen Victoria's marriage to Prince Albert in 1840. As Elizabeth H. Pleck notes, "Victoria was easily the most influential bride in white" (Pleck 2000: 207).<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, however, Edwina Ehrman, curator at the Victoria & Albert Museum, points out that the colour white had less to do with signifying the bride's innocence and purity (as still celebrated in many societies today) and more with status and wealth (Ehrman qtd. in BBC 2018),<sup>8</sup> and hence, implicitly, with power also. The latter may go some way to explaining the continuing "totemic power" (BBC 2018) of the wedding dress in present-day culture – and in *Sherlock*.

Fittingly, *Sherlock's* neo-Victorian bride holds a gun, an appropriated symbol of phallic power, calling into question the idea that a wedding should celebrate "romantic love, that fairy tale of the prince charming and his young virgin beauty, who chose each other freely because of mutual attraction and then lived happily ever after" (Pleck 2000: 208). Mary shoots Sherlock when he offers his help, namely when he tries to patronise her by implicitly relegating her to the role of dutiful 'Angel in the House' in line with her caring nursing profession. Commenting on the role of murderous women in Victorian fiction, Virginia B. Morris observes that these female figures

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struck home literally and metaphorically. [...] In committing murder, these otherwise ordinary women also struck hard at the cherished image of Victorian womanhood – the gentle, nurturing guardian of morality and the home. (Morris 1990: 1)

Shooting is a matter of business for Mary, and she is not driven by passion or domestic abuse. On the contrary, she calculatingly chooses not to kill Sherlock, who defines her action as “surgery” (Hurrin 2014: 0:51:11), stressing Mary’s symbolic shift from nurse to doctor. Mary is not hysterical, so to speak, but acts with coldblooded rationality, forcing Sherlock to recognise her entitlement – like Irene Adler’s before her – to become his equal and double.

Unsurprisingly, in line with the series’ ambiguous gender politics, Mary’s newfound (castrating?) power is almost immediately undercut, as the next scenes in Sherlock’s Baker Street apartment relegate her to the role of client, restoring, at least at a performative level, the detective’s superiority. The phallic gun also reminds Sherlock that Mary is no longer virgin or due to lose her virginity, effectively depriving her of her status as bride and wife (and future mother) while within his own domain. ‘His Last Vow’ makes clear that John and Mary will not have sexual intercourse during their stay in the apartment, which may calm Sherlock’s evident Freudian anxiety concerning the prohibited witnessing of the parental sex act, as well as his homoerotic jealousy about ‘sharing’ John with Mary.

Clothes help Sherlock visualise performative roles, but this process ultimately highlights his inability to perceive identities as a coherent continuum of signifiers: Mary is portrayed as bride, wife, and killer, but Sherlock is unable to recognise these aspects as being part of the same model. These three different representations vividly recall the so-called Triple Goddess in mythology (see Graves 1955: 6). As Robert Graves observes, when matriarchy still ruled, the three phases of the moon represented the three stages of womanhood and the three personifications of virginity, fertility and wisdom or death. A comparable archaic vision highlights Sherlock’s unresolved childhood conflicts. As in many fairy tales, where the good mother and wicked step-mother or witch are drastically separated, or in most Victorian fiction, which draws radical distinctions between ‘good’ suffering women and ‘bad’ women deserving punishment,

*Sherlock*'s iconic female dresses epitomise the detective's inability to integrate the various aspects of Mary's postmodern femininity. Sherlock can be rightly considered as a fetishist, but what excites him is not the fetishised garment employed in the actual sex act, but the social identity it embodies in the sublimation of sex. Accordingly, he gains pleasure from playing a game where his position as 'detective' allows him to solve the case, especially when it comes to dominant threatening women.

#### 4. “*Cherchez la Femme*”: Dressing the Bride

The trope of the bride returns in ‘The Abominable Bride’, a special episode in Victorian costumes broadcast on New Year's Day 2016, as part of the BBC's special programming for the festive season. Despite being advertised as an independent variation on a theme (*Sherlock* [Official YouTube Channel] 2015), the story is eventually revealed to be a drug-induced hallucination. As Lynnette Porter observes,

[t]he ‘Victorian holiday special’ is not really Victorian, and whatever dissonance in the setting or characterization viewers may perceive from ‘authentic’ Victorian-set stories can be blamed on Sherlock's subconscious understanding of what it means to be Victorian. (Porter 2016: 37)

The hallucination device thus serves as a metafictional reflection on the series' neo-Victorian recycling of Conan Doyle's ‘pre-texts’, here turned into pretexts for the protagonists' (and viewers') vicarious time-travelling. The digression allows Sherlock to free himself from the coat's sexualisation by appealing to the more prudish style of the Victorians. However, as Bruzzi observes of costume dramas, “[p]eriod clothes are not always transparent and are capable of being deeply ambiguous” (Bruzzi 2002: 248), not least because they serve present-day creative (and fetishist) imperatives rather than real historical subjects' self-fashioning. As Bruzzi goes on to argue, “[t]he power of clothes fetishism [...] exists on the cusp between display and denial, signalling as much a lack as a presence of sexual desire, through which it is especially relevant to films that depict a past, less ostensibly liberated age” (Bruzzi 2002: 248). Consequently, despite hiding bodies behind layers of fabric, period costumes in this special episode end up drawing even more attention to gender issues, since the sharp contrast

between the nineteenth-century setting on screen and the characters' twenty-first-century 'real' world inevitably invites the viewer to *look at* costumes and examine their discourse as fetish icons.

Indulging in a Gothic atmosphere imbued with sensationalism, the episode focuses on the case of Emelia Ricoletti, a bride who is seen committing suicide in front of a crowd and then returning from the grave to kill her errant husband and other men. Something bigger is at stake than individual vengeance, suspects Mycroft, who thus warns Sherlock: "Our way of life is under threat from an invisible enemy, one that hovers at our elbow on a daily basis" (Mackinnon 2016: 0:29:05-0:29:12). The spectral threat remains unknown until the end but is foreshadowed by the emphasis placed upon the re-contextualisation of female roles in the shift from the twenty-first- to nineteenth-century setting. For instance, Molly Hooper, the pathologist who has a crush on Sherlock in the series, is forced into male clothes to embark upon a career at the morgue. While transvestism recurs frequently in Doyle's stories in support of brilliant minds, for Molly, male clothes become a symbol of female oppression, highlighted by Watson's sharp comments about "what one has to do to get ahead in a *man's* world" (Mackinnon 2016: 0:21:19-0:21:22; added emphasis).

When Mary Morstan appears, her role as John Watson's wife is underlined once again in relation to specific fashion icons. She waits in the Baker Street apartment attired in what looks like a mourning dress, another fashion popularised by Queen Victoria, following Albert's death. Retiring from society and her public responsibilities, the "inconsolable" Victoria took the performative role of devoted sorrowful wife/widow to extremes, with her ladies in waiting "instructed to wear dresses of black wool trimmed with crape, plain linen, black shoes, gloves, and crape fans. (Goldthorpe 1989: 72). While likewise mourning the albeit metaphoric death of a husband completely absorbed in homosociality, Mary behaves like a Penelope waiting for his return, with the dress reinforcing her social identity as wife.

Moriarty makes his entrance as well, but when Sherlock confronts him, the Victorian plot is disrupted and exposed as a drug-induced dream. As Sherlock keeps hallucinating, the narrative vacillates between the Victorian enactment and several false awakenings in twenty-first-century reality. Emelia's case finally reaches a turning point when Sherlock enters a church as the members of a sect perform a rite, hiding under pointed hoods.

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He already knows their identity: “The invisible army hovering at our elbow, attending to our homes, raising our children, ignored, patronised, disregarded, not allowed so much as a vote” (Mackinnon 2016: 1:11:29-1:11:44) – women, in fact, who helped Emelia plan the killing of men to revenge their oppression. The hoods are more reminiscent of some exclusively male religious orders, recalling Irene Adler’s donning of the phallic dominatrix’s costume. Yet when a veiled bride, presumably the leader, approaches Sherlock, the latter is bewildered to find Moriarty’s face appear from behind the veil. The detective experiences a false awakening and asks his brother to help him find Emelia’s tomb in the present – “*Cherchez la femme*”, replies Mycroft before accepting (Mackinnon 2016: 1:18:23-1:18:25) – but finds himself at the Reichenbach Falls instead, where he confronts Moriarty for the last time. As in ‘A Scandal in Belgravia’, the woman or women once again mediate implicitly homoerotic relations between men. Sherlock does not desire sexual union with the fetishised bride, so much as the encounter and intellectual confrontation with his male opponent whom she represents.

The episode’s plot thus revolves around the act of unveiling, unmasking, and undressing *women* hidden behind iconic period costumes, who are eventually unmasked as *men* turned into fetishised objects of desire. The quest for the ‘true’ bride might be more accurately described as ‘*Cherchez l’homme*’. Taking inspiration from the fashion of the 1880s (the drama is set in 1895 but the bride marries 10 years before), Sarah Arthur claims she found an original piece of Victorian lace for Emelia Ricoletti’s wedding dress. The lace was used for the bodice and the long sleeves, while the rest is made of cream silk (Arthur 2016: 0:02:58-0:04:23), a colour that underlines the vintage aura of the dress. In other words, both bride and dress are presented as visual emblems of pastness. Fittingly, Bruzzi observes that “[f]etishism (as opposed to eroticism) is founded on tension, distance and imagination, and is dependent on symbolic rather than actual association between the subject and the object of (his) desire” (Bruzzi 2002: 251). The blurred temporal line shifts the focus from the piece of clothing itself to its re-imagination as neo-Victorian gender signifier, so that the revival of Victoriana participates in the stimulation of fetish desire – doubly so in this case, as the bridal gown also stands in for Sherlock’s queer desire for Moriarty.

Additionally the bride's iconic look on screen may be described as 'steampunked' through the addition of weapons that look like long-barrelled Colt Model 1878 Double Action revolvers,<sup>9</sup> also called 'Frontier' revolvers, a reference to Emelia's connection with America. Albeit not relevant to the episode's narrative, the steampunk discourse is justified on several counts. First of all, even though steampunk privileges the Victorian aesthetic of the machine and retro-futuristic technologies, it also operates through the variables of gender and race relations (Beard 2014: xxiv). Sarah Arthur explains that when she created the bridal costume she considered not only historical authenticity but also functionality. Given that the episode features action scenes, it was essential for the actress to be able to move freely. As Mary Anne Taylor notes, "[s]teampunk style blends the aesthetics of femininity with practical application that is inherently read as masculine" (Taylor 2014: 41). In addition, the overlap between Victorian lace and long revolvers, connoting the bride as violent, creates a sharp contrast that can be read as anachronistic, in line with steampunk's time-bending tendencies. Lastly, it can be noticed that the corset under the bridal dress does not look as tight as it would have been in the Victorian period, and the typical extra-small S-silhouette of the waist is not particularly emphasised. Such manipulations, slightly violating historical authenticity, end up inspiring a 'look-at' reading of the costume that draws attention to its appearance as fetish object.

The bride also recalls Dickens's Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations* (1861). Attired in the decaying wedding dress she had worn when she was abandoned by her lover, Havisham is portrayed, in Amber K. Regis and Deborah Wynne's words, as "an aging woman who is trapped in, and fixated on, the past" (Regis and Wynne 2012: 36). The wedding dress here symbolises the fetishisation of her youthful trauma of abandonment, as she derives masochistic pleasure from her continuous reliving of the wrong committed against her. In line with Jaime Wright's claim that "steampunks re-present the past...as they imagine it should have been" (Wright 2014: 98; original ellipses), *Sherlock's* Emelia Ricoletti 'rewrites' the past of all oppressed and exploited women, perpetrating an extreme murderous version of Havisham's revenge, (which, of course, is reserved for Pip alone). Ricoletti and her conspirators derive their gratification not from breaking male hearts but stopping them outright, perverting the symbol of *eros* and new beginnings into one of fetishised violence and *thanatos*.

Emelia's performative appropriation of costume and guns is meant to exemplarily punish men; the importance of an audience emerges from the beginning, when Lestrade's narration of the case turns Sherlock's apartment into a studio setting. Even Emelia's simulated suicide is emblematic: she fakes her own death as if on stage, on the balcony of her house. The performance eventually confuses the difference between the roles of the female subject and male Other: she targets men shouting "You?" until she asks "Or me?" and shoots herself (Mackinnon 2016: 0:11:56-0:13:06).

Performativity is also suggested during the ritual scene, where women hide behind pointed hoods. According to Felicia McDuffie,

[t]he robes and the church mark out this scene as an arena of penitence [where] Sherlock confronts and repents of his mistreatment of the women in his life and, by extension, of his mistreatment of the emotional and feminine aspects of his own character. (McDuffie 2016: 45)

The scene, however, can also be analysed through the lens of clothing fetishism, since "[i]n pornographic literature, masks are associated with torturers, executioners, and burglars" (Steele 1996: 306). The detective who punishes criminals risks being found guilty himself, and by unmasking the hooded members of the sect, Sherlock exorcises his anxieties towards the dominatrix. Once again, however, the fetish game proves dangerous: the dichotomy 'You/I', marked throughout the episode, is complicated by the uncanny vision of Moriarty behind the bridal veil, with the Y of "you" carved into his bloody lips. If so far as "[t]here is no objectification without identification" (Burgin 1996: 67), Sherlock, in the pursuit of *la femme*, eventually finds Moriarty, his double, and accordingly himself. Instead of a fetish substituting the penis, he finds a real penis: the object of fetishism itself is overtly exposed. Is Sherlock terrified by the potential homoerotic outcome of his discovery? Or rather by the idea of identifying with a model of patriarchy?

##### 5. "Look at me": Dressing the Sister

The fourth season of *Sherlock* seems intended to provide answers to open questions. The last episode, 'The Final Problem' (2017, S.4, Ep.3), reveals the existence of Mycroft and Sherlock's sister, Eurus, whom the younger



brother removed from his mind as a consequence of childhood trauma. Both incredibly intelligent and dangerously unstable, Eurus was incarcerated at an early age in a remote secure institution called Sherrinford, from which she supposedly escapes. Once there, Sherlock, Mycroft, and John find out she has taken over the facility, and the three men are psychologically tortured by Eurus and her henchmen. At the Holmes' "ancestral" location Musgrave Hall (Caron 2017: 0:11:40-0:11:48), Sherlock finally remembers Eurus killing his childhood best friend, Victor. In order to cope with the trauma, Sherlock substituted the figure of the child with that of a pet dog he never had.

The fetish implications, from the sexual point of view, are perhaps less obvious in this episode. Nonetheless, it appeals to performativity and genre as well as gender clichés – not least as Eurus conflates aspects of the postfeminist dominatrix with the elements of the quintessential Victorian *femme fatale* and incarcerated madwoman.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the psychological torture at Sherrinford proves a game of make-believe, and the episodes combine several styles, ranging from action scenes *à la* James Bond, to Gothic architecture and horror reminiscences. When Sherlock first meets his sister, the portrayal of the asylum patient is redefined in a more fashionable way. The woman is neatly and entirely dressed in white, which includes a loose blouse, cropped trousers and ballet flats. The bateau neckline, with a small V in the middle, provides some dynamism, while the shapeless design of the blouse hides her female curves. Eurus's attire emphasises her most childish aspects, so that her white clothes and long dark hair remind viewers of stereotyped icons from horror movies, such as the protagonist of *The Ring* (2002), but perhaps also of Victorian depictions of Ophelia as the pitiable madwoman who 'dies for love'.<sup>11</sup> From behind a glass partition, Sherlock asks how she escaped from the institution, and the dialogue continues as follows:

EURUS: Easy. Look at me.

SHERLOCK: I am looking at you.

EURUS: You can't see it, can you? You try and try, but you just can't see, you can't look.

SHERLOCK: See what? (Caron 2017: 0:27:12-0:27:22)

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Sherlock finds out that, actually, there is no glass between them and he can touch his sister. He thus learns about the difference between *looking at* and looking *through* costumes and props, presumably realising that the analysis and objectification of bodies without ‘emotional context’ does not allow him to go beyond flattened icons.

Sherlock’s final step towards personal growth is stimulated by the confrontation with his sister rather than a potential sexual partner, as if to remark that while gender relationships in the series are often conceived in sexual terms, the ability to love and respect, if correctly internalised within the family, transcends the symbolism of asymmetric gender constructions. While the violence and cruelty against Victor, if committed by male children, might have been viewed as an inevitable part of boys’ ‘nature’ with Victor’s death deemed the result of a boyish prank gone wrong, no such leniency was accorded the ‘bad’ and ‘unnatural’ girl child violating patriarchal norms of femininity. Eurus is no Oedipal mother, but a peer who has been excluded from the post-Oedipal homosocial bond. Appropriately, as if to replay her jealous killing of her childhood rival for Sherlock’s affections, her resentment of her brother’s male relationships is expressed by first trying to force Sherlock to shoot either Mycroft or his closest male friend, John Watson, and later attempts to kill John in the same manner as Victor. Refusing to die for love, this mad ‘Ophelia’ would kill what Sherlock loves instead.

The figures of the mother and sister are nevertheless linked. Crucially, it is Mary who provides an epilogue for the series, replacing Watson’s role as narrator: by taking a bullet meant for Sherlock in ‘The Six Thatchers’ (2017, S.??, Ep. ??), she amends for her previous act of violence against him. The shot also restores her canonical role as ‘Mary Watson’, the wife that is meant to be penetrated. Before dying, she records a videotape that is watched by Sherlock and John at the end of the episode. The woman who comes back from the past and the dead (akin to Eurus) is no longer violent, however, since gender conflicts are presumably overcome. Thus, the last shots, showing Sherlock and John parenting Mary’s daughter, suggest a queer potential that is not based on sex but rather on the intimacy of ‘feminised’ emotions and familiar relationships.

## 6. “It is what it is”: Epilogue and Conclusions

As demonstrated in this article, costumes play a leading role as fetish objects in portraying gender conflicts in *Sherlock*. As is the case with the script, which self-reflexively refers to the existence of a canon, costumes as well, by means of historical or vintage nuances, invite the viewer to reflect upon the re-location of Victorian aesthetic signifiers and their meanings in the twenty-first century. The visual representation is suspended between past and present, so that the difference between contemporary clothes and period costumes is always blurred. By means of garments that usually recur in fetish fantasies, the series self-reflexively looks at costumes while inviting viewers to look through them, namely to re-contextualise them within more fluid gender constructions, even while subverting some of their more radical implications with regards to postfeminist desire and agency. In such contexts, the fetishised costume functions as a ritual object by which the Victorian past is both summoned and exorcised. In other words, by re-creating performative dimensions strongly focused on the role of costumes, Sherlock gains pleasure from the illusory ability to dominate frightening female figures that symbolically replace the sister he removed from his memories. Instead of accepting the past (the death of his best friend and therefore the loss of homosociality), Sherlock tells himself a better story (the substitution of the child with the dog and later with Irene, Mary, and the abominable brides). However, by showing the illusory outcome of fetish performances, *Sherlock* also acknowledges the risks of re-writing an uncomfortable past. ‘Acceptance’, rather than manipulation, seems to be the preferred solution. In Sherlock’s own words, “it is what it is” (Hurran 2017: 1:22:24-1:22:25).

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**Notes**

1. Details about the credits of *Sherlock*'s episodes (writers, directors, etc.) were retrieved from the official BBC One website *Sherlock* (section 'Episodes') at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b018ttws/episodes/guide>.
2. Details about the costumes are available on Ray Holman's official website, under the section 'My CV'; see <http://www.costume-designer.co.uk/my-cv/>. Digit on the tool 'Search' for more entries.
3. Due to the lack of developed material about this subject, the present quotations are taken from the abstract of a paper presented by Angela Calleya Dan at the ASYRAS Conference 2017, which I attended at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona in January 2017. The paper was promoted by the Association of Young Researchers on Anglophone Studies (ASYRAS).
4. See Vogue 2018: 'Spring 2003 Ready-to-Wear – Matthew Williamson', <http://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/spring-2003-ready-to-wear/matthew-williamson>. The dress is featured in the picture number 34 of the view slideshow.
5. Mary's shirt can be viewed at *Sherlock Unravelled 2015-2018*: <http://sherlockunravelled.com/post/111021426997/antipodium-double-digits-shirt-as-worn-by-mary-in>.
6. Appropriately, Bourvis's atelier in London specialises "in restoring and recreating beautiful antique wedding dresses, working with antique laces, also recreating styles from the 20's & 30's" (Bourvis n.d.).
7. For Victoria and Albert's wedding photograph, showing off the queen's wedding dress, see Wikimedia Commons 2018: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Queen\\_Victoria\\_Albert\\_1854.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Queen_Victoria_Albert_1854.JPG).
8. As the BBC web article citing Ehrman goes on to explain, "[i]n the days when washing was done painstakingly by hand with a washboard, a white dress was almost impossible to clean thoroughly. 'It was a garment you just wore once, so it was only for the very wealthy.'" (BBC 2018). In this sense, it is ironic that Mary symbolically 'comes clean' about her past attired in her wedding dress. While "[w]hite or off-white shades" soon became the most popular colours for wedding dresses in the Victorian era, Caroline Goldthorpe points out that "they were by no means the only choice, and it was quite acceptable for a fashionable bride to be married in a colored day- or evening-style gown, or even in a traveling dress, which doubled as the going-away outfit" (Goldthorpe 1988: 62).
9. For an image of the armed Ricoletti, see Curtis 2016: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3381464/Bewildered-Sherlock-fans->

- [storm-Twitter-TV-return-sees-sleuth-repeatedly-jump-time-Moriarty-s-fate.html](#). For a comparison of the weapons, consult Flayderman 2007: 109.
10. As the reviewer Gavia Baker-Whitelaw remarked, referring to the episode as the “most sexist” of the series, Euros “ticks every box for the kind of madwoman who gets locked up in an asylum in a 19th century melodrama” (Baker-Whitelaw 2017: n.p.).
  11. For a discussion of the Ophelia trope in Victorian art and culture, see Elaine Showalter 1985 and Kiefer 2001.

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