

## **The Naked Truth: The Postfeminist Afterlives of Irene Adler**

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**Abstract:**

The article addresses the transformations of Irene Adler, the female character of Arthur Conan Doyle's first Sherlock Holmes short story 'A Scandal in Bohemia' (1891) in recent literary and screen adaptations and appropriations. The focus is on the most current rendition of Irene Adler in the BBC's TV series *Sherlock* from 2012 (series 2, episode 1), with reference to the use of the character by the same name in the two Guy Ritchie films, *Sherlock Holmes* (2009) and *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011), as well as in the earlier, arguably neo-Victorian mystery novel *Goodnight, Mr Holmes* by Carole Nelson Douglas (1990). The article analyses the noticeable curtailment of Adler's agency combined with her overt sexualisation in the screen afterlives. Such "afterings" (Humpherys 2007: 442) of the only female character to outwit the legendarily astute detective are examined in the light of seemingly unwavering postfeminist and neo-conservative trends present in mainstream, big budget TV and film adaptations and appropriations of nineteenth-century classics.

**Keywords:** adaptation, aftering, agency, clothing, gender, neo-conservative, neo-Victorian/Victorian, postfeminist, sexuality, Sherlock Holmes.

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Irene Adler, the only female character who ever outwitted the legendarily astute Sherlock Holmes, appears in 'A Scandal in Bohemia', the first of Arthur Conan Doyle's detective stories published in *The Strand* (1891) and later collected in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892). Since the story's first appearance, there have been many afterlives of "the woman" in screen adaptations and appropriations of the Holmes canon (Conan Doyle 1994: 3).<sup>1</sup> In this article I will focus on the most recent renditions of Irene Adler in the BBC's TV cult series *Sherlock* from 2012 ('A Scandal in Belgravia', series 2, episode 1), with reference to the use of the character by the same name in the two equally successful Guy Ritchie films, *Sherlock Holmes* (2009) and *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011). The

analysis will also touch upon the appropriation of Adler in the neo-Victorian mystery novel *Goodnight, Mr Holmes* by Carole Nelson Douglas (1990) and in several other earlier screen adaptations and appropriations.

The term “aftering” will here be used in order to “describe the ‘writing over’ of Victorian novels” so notably present in late twentieth-century fiction, as Anne Humpherys points out (Humpherys 2007: 442), but also, I would add, in Victorian novels’ twenty-first-century afterlives in the shape of screen adaptations and appropriations. ‘Aftering’ will therefore be understood as a term including both adaptations and appropriations of Victorian heritage that show a self-conscious, intertextual, and often ironic relationship with the adapted texts and the past in general. As such, ‘aftering’ will be read as a key element of the neo-Victorian phenomenon: a product of the desire to have more, and still more, of the cherished Victorian heritage today, but a version of heritage shaped and produced along the lines of contemporary needs and expectations.

My investigation will highlight an important matter that needs addressing when thinking about neo-Victorianism *on screen*. What I want to call attention to is 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. This crucial issue is one that screen adaptations of Victorian heritage partly share with neo-Victorian fiction, namely its obsession with sensational representations of Victorians’ sexuality and sexual lives that often goes hand in hand with a belated, modern-day Orientalism which locates the exotic Other in the Victorian past, a practise that Marie-Luise Kohlke has dubbed “sexsation” (Kohlke 2008: 11-18).

While there has been much commentary on the prurience, sensationalism, and marketing impulses behind the incentive to make the Victorians sexy and sexual in recent screen adaptations of classic novels, little attention has been paid to the simultaneous erosion of female characters’ agency in the same afterings.<sup>2</sup> Kohlke’s concept of ‘sexsation’ informs this article’s study of the push and pull between, on the one hand, the sensationalist urge to ‘liberate’ the Victorians of the adapted nineteenth-century text by introducing nudity and sexually risqué narrative elements on screen, and, on the other hand, a simultaneous, less obvious, and arguably nostalgic neo-conservative (re)introduction of traditional gender roles.

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Kohlke's discussion of 'sexsation' is confined to literary texts, which is in line with the general trend of Neo-Victorian Studies. There has been a curious lack of sustained engagement with screen adaptations of Victorian heritage within Neo-Victorian Studies. Works in this field have, so far, mostly been focused on fiction (including graphic novels) with some attention paid to film adaptations of Victorian and/or neo-Victorian fiction, usually as part of a broader discussion of the relevant adapted text. However, neo-Victorianism *on screen* as a subject in its own right has rarely been dealt with independently.<sup>3</sup> Book-length studies, which are few and far between, are focused on adaptations of classics and not necessarily on self-professedly neo-Victorian adaptations.<sup>4</sup> However, when it comes to books dedicated to the phenomenon of neo-Victorianism, even when the omnipresence of screen afterlives of Victorian literature and culture is acknowledged, afterings of Victorian heritage on screen are marginal to the analysis.<sup>5</sup> Those few rare examples of screen adaptations that are discussed, as Imelda Whelehan points out, are rarely regarded on "equal terms, but rather as an illustration of a lesser achievement, or even as doing an active disservice to the book" (Whelehan 2012: 273), or else as token examinations of intermedial neo-Victorianisms from the point of view of literary studies in books that primarily focus on neo-Victorian fiction.<sup>6</sup> Such reticence regarding the inclusion of screen texts and screen afterings is all the more surprising since "neo-Victorian literary texts are themselves adaptations; even when they do not refer back to a single Urtext, they remain compatible with contemporary definitions of adaptation and appropriation" (Whelehan 2012: 272). In other words, they adapt previous versions of 'the Victorian' as mediated in text and on screen.

Through its analysis of recent screen afterings of Irene Adler this article aims to illustrate the relevance of screen adaptations of Victorian heritage for Neo-Victorian Studies (and the importance of a closer alignment and interaction between the overlapping fields of adaptation studies and Neo-Victorian Studies). Furthermore, since screen adaptations of Victorian classics by and large belong to the genre of costume drama, these connections are all the more pertinent because, in Julianne Pidduck's words, "historical fiction and costume drama alike depict the past through the stylistic, critical and generic vocabularies of present cultural production" (Pidduck 2004: 4).

### 1. Neo-Victorianism and the Limits of Subversion

In their seminal work on neo-Victorianism, Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn propose that, to be classified as neo-Victorian, “texts (literary, filmic, audio/visual) must in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*”, thus exhibiting a “sustained need to reinterpret the Victorians and what they mean to us” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 4, 9, original emphasis). Without a doubt, one of the most re-interpreted and re-visited aspects of the Victorian era has been its stereotypically repressed sexuality, serving as the irresistible dark corner to be explored and re-imagined, and ultimately used as a foil to contemporary notions of the sexually liberated and sexually knowledgeable individual. Despite Steven Marcus’s *Other Victorians* (1966), Michel Foucault’s influential *The History of Sexuality* (1976), and the work published by scholars as varied as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985), Michael Mason (1994), Matthew Sweet (2001), and Sharon Marcus (2007), to note just some of the most famous debunkers of persistent notions about Victorian repression and sexualities, the stereotype of the ‘buttoned-up’ Victorian seems to prevail in popular imagination, continuously attracting new re-visionings of Victorian intimacy in literary and screen texts.

As a result of this near-obsession with Victorian private lives, we find many fictional re-interpretations of Victorian gender roles and critiques of the limited agency of Victorian women. Numerous neo-Victorian texts focus on re-visioning the stories of carnal passion and sexual relations missing from Victorian fiction, from Jean Rhys’s descriptions of desire in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and John Fowles’s depiction of a fumbled sexual encounter in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969) and its film adaptation by Karel Reisz (1981), through explicit sex and full-frontal nudity in Sandra Goldbacher’s *The Governess* (1998), Jane Campion’s *The Piano* (1993) and *The Portrait of a Lady* (1996), to Sarah Waters’s sexual encounters and lesbian trysts in *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) and *Fingersmith* (2001), and on to the interracial, cross-class sex of Belinda Starling’s *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2006). Whether in fiction or on screen, these afterings of Victorian intimacy invariably envisage themselves as enlarging the story of the Victorians by putting sex in, thereby supposedly liberating Victorian characters from the shackles of their social mores, and titillating readers and viewers in the process.

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However, I would suggest that, rather than exhibiting an unequivocally liberating potential, these neo-Victorian exposés of Victorian sexual hypocrisy and gendered oppression lose their impact in the sheer repetition of these tropes.<sup>7</sup> When looked at cumulatively, this ‘sexsation’ turns into a dominant, *prescriptive* narrative that clouds the ideologically suspect undercurrents at work. More specifically, I want to argue that the obsession of contemporary neo-Victorian fiction – and, even more prominently, recent screen adaptations and appropriations of Victorian classics – with ‘updating’ Victorian narratives and characters through the addition of sex and nudity, performs an ethical as well as an aesthetic turn that sabotages the feminist potential of the texts they adapt.

In a number of neo-Victorian films and screen adaptations of classic Victorian texts and themes, the spectacle of the nude or scantily clad female body draws viewers’ attention away from diminished rather than enhanced female agency in these contemporary renditions of female characters. Furthermore, interpolated nudity is all the more provocative because it relies on perceived notions of Victorians as being, by definition, repressed. Recent adaptations and appropriations of the character of Irene Adler serve as a case in point. By introducing the spectacle of nudity and sexual innuendo thinly veiled as the sexual liberation of the Victorian text and the Victorian character, they surreptitiously introduce a much more reactionary aftering of Adler. In the process, they end up resuscitating Victorian narrative clichés and character types of the *femme fatale*, the fallen woman, and the damsel in distress, paradoxically contributing to the ossification of generalised stereotypes of the Victorians as sexually repressed victims of strict gender roles.

The stereotypically overdressed Victorian woman, still present in the 1984 Granada Television’s eponymous adaptation of ‘The Scandal in Bohemia’ (series one, episode one of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, starring Jeremy Brett as Holmes and Gayle Hunnicutt as Adler) slowly gives way to the tightly-laced, sexualised tom-boyishness of Rachel McAdams’s Adler in the Guy Ritchie version, culminating in the naked body of Lara Pulver as Adler in BBC *Sherlock’s* ‘A Scandal in Belgravia’. When analysed, these depictions point to a supposedly liberated and highly sexualised depiction of women whose agency, however, becomes increasingly more limited on screen – particularly when contrasted with the nineteenth-century text they use as a source.

## 2. Irene Adler, the *Victorian* Woman

As Sherlock Holmes's antagonist, the character of Irene Adler appears only in a single story, 'A Scandal in Bohemia' (1891), and is thereafter only mentioned by name in 'The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle' and 'A Case of Identity' – all three collected in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892) – and again in 'His Last Bow' (first published in 1917). Conan Doyle opens the story with the following description, which I will quote at some length here for clarity's sake:

To Sherlock Holmes she is always *the* woman. I have seldom heard him mention her under any other name. In his eyes she eclipses and predominates the whole of her sex. It was not that he felt any emotion akin to love for Irene Adler. All emotions, and that one particularly, were abhorrent to his cold, precise but admirably balanced mind. He was, I take it, the most perfect reasoning and observing machine that the world has seen, but as a lover he would have placed himself in a false position. He never spoke of the softer passions, save with a gibe and a sneer. They were admirable things for the observer – excellent for drawing the veil from men's motives and actions. But for the trained reasoner to admit such intrusions into his own delicate and finely adjusted temperament was to introduce a distracting factor which might throw a doubt upon all his mental results. Grit in a sensitive instrument, or a crack in one of his own high-power lenses, would not be more disturbing than a strong emotion in a nature such as his. And yet there was but one woman to him, and that woman was the late Irene Adler, of dubious and questionable memory. (Conan Doyle 1994: 3, original emphasis)

It is, in other words, fairly obvious from the very beginning of this late Victorian story that Irene Adler will not just be the only woman to outsmart the *über*-rational detective, but also *the* woman to redefine Holmes's dismissive view of the whole sex.

In the course of the narrative, she is transformed from a suspected villain into a wronged woman. The king of Bohemia, anxious to go through

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an arranged royal marriage to a morally upright Scandinavian princess, hires Holmes to locate and steal the photograph in Adler's possession that is the only remaining proof of his involvement with – and engagement to – this opera singer and adventuress in his youth. He suggests that she is blackmailing him out of jealousy; however, by the end of the story it appears she has kept the photograph as a means of protection. Adler earns Sherlock's respect by staying one step ahead of him and foiling his plan to steal the photograph. She quickly realises Holmes had come under her roof in the disguise of a clergyman in order to discover the hiding place of the photograph, follows him dressed in male attire and, having ascertained his identity, cockily bids him goodnight as she walks by.<sup>8</sup> The following day she disappears from London, having married her lawyer the day before and making the spying Holmes an inadvertent witness at the ceremony. She leaves a photograph of herself for the king and a letter addressed to Holmes in the hiding place she knew he had detected. Even though the rescue of the photograph is thwarted, the king is relieved and offers any reward Holmes desires. Holmes, curiously, claims the photograph of Adler, which the self-absorbed, jubilant king grants gladly. The conclusion of the story reads as follows:

And that was how a great scandal threatened to affect the kingdom of Bohemia, and how the best plans of Mr. Sherlock Holmes were beaten by a woman's wit. He used to make merry over the cleverness of women, but I have not heard him do it of late. And when he speaks of Irene Adler, or when he refers to her photograph, it is always under the honourable title of *the* woman. (Conan Doyle 1994: 28-29)

Holmes's reaction is admiration, deference, and respect – a rare show of esteem on the part of the proverbially cold detective, especially toward the opposite sex. *The* woman presents a puzzle to Holmes, claims Pascale Krumm, *because* she is a woman and, as such, according to Victorian conceptions of gender differences, remains a Freudian *dark continent* (Krumm 1996: 194). Moreover, even though Holmes himself is a master of disguise, he fails to recognise the body of a woman in disguise; as Rosemary Jann comments, “feminine sexuality eludes the rational solution of mystery promised by the Holmes stories” (Jann 1990: 687). Adler is

described as “the daintiest thing under a bonnet on this planet” by the loiterers in her neighbourhood and, by Holmes himself, as “a lovely woman, with a face that a man might die for” (Conan Doyle 1994: 15, 17). At the same time, she is a gender-bending creature who easily slips in and out of male disguise, thanks to her training as an actress and her deep contralto, and she not only possesses, in the king’s words, “the face of the most beautiful of women” but also “the mind of the most resolute of men” (Conan Doyle 1994: 12, 13).

Adler’s ability to shape-shift and cross gender barriers adds to her mystique, but first and foremost it qualifies her as an autonomous subject. Her transformations signal her agency and her control over her own body and identity: she acts on her own behalf and in her own interest. In this regard it is not without consequence that the previously mentioned BBC adaptation from 1984, as well as the appropriation of Irene Adler’s character in Carole Nelson Douglas’s mystery novel *Good Night, Mr Holmes* from 1990, both retain Conan Doyle’s ending as well as the characterisation of Irene Adler as a self-reliant, independent, and resourceful *prima donna*, rather than as a criminal or sex worker, as in more recent afterings. More noticeably, these two afterings do not introduce nudity or an erotically charged relationship between Adler and Holmes, but focus instead on the resourcefulness of Adler’s character displayed through her intelligence, acting skills and the art of refashioning her persona and appearance.

### 3. Irene Adler, the Neo-Victorian Heroine

*Goodnight, Mr Holmes* is the first in Carole Nelson Douglas’s series of Irene Adler mysteries, featuring the retired *prima donna* of Conan Doyle’s text as a detective, complete with her own female Watson. Among other things, the first novel depicts Adler’s identity through her ability to transform herself by a constant recycling and reconstruction of her clothing. These transformations are reported in detail by Adler’s sidekick, Penelope Huxleigh, a parson’s daughter and spinster who serves as a counterpart to Holmes’s doctor Watson inasmuch as she is the voice of Victorian propriety and decorum. Huxleigh’s ability to appreciate Adler’s sartorial accomplishments is explained by her previous apprenticeship at a draper’s shop (see Douglas 1990: 15, 17, 37). Adler’s unconventional attitudes to gender roles, marriage, and the woman’s sphere, constantly commented on by Huxleigh with a mixture of awe and disapproval, are inextricably



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intertwined with Adler's fluid visual identity that reflects her need to reinvent herself and to adapt at all times:

Despite its lavish appearance, her wardrobe consisted of surprisingly few ensembles. The jumble of hand-me-down trims she collected in street markets transformed this raw material to fit any occasion, station in life or mood that suited her. Nor did Irene give a fig leaf for how nicely she accomplished her transformations. Often of an evening, I, who had been taught to sew spider-fine stitches, would watch Irene driving her large-eyed needle in great galloping strides as she affixed a glittering swag of trim on a plain-Jane gown. The same long, loose stitches would be as roughly ripped free when the gown required another change of character. (Nelson Douglas 1990: 64-65)

The treatment of Irene Adler's character in Nelson Douglas's novel, at least in this first instalment in the series, has been identified as neo-Victorian by Ann Humpherys and as a feminist revision by Sabine Vanacker because of its playful approach to Victorian gender roles (Humpherys 2007: 446; Vanacker 2013: 95). Even though Adler eventually conforms to the dominant social mores and marries Geoffrey Norton, following Conan Doyle's plot, the relationship is depicted as a marriage of equals and partners. The novel thus adheres to Conan Doyle's narrative outline and characterisation, making Adler an intelligent and active subject, and maintaining the original story's respectful, admiring attitude towards Adler.

There has been a long tradition of depicting Irene Adler as Sherlock Holmes's love interest in Holmesian afterings, for example, in the TV film *Sherlock Holmes in New York* (1976), the fictional biography of Sherlock Holmes by William Stuart Baring-Gould, *Sherlock Holmes: A Biography of the World's First Consulting Detective* (1962), John T. Lescroart's novel *Son of Holmes* (1986), or *The Language of Bees* (2009) by Laurie R. King.<sup>9</sup> Guy Ritchie's action-packed Holmes films follow in those footsteps; hence in *Sherlock Holmes* (2009), Irene Adler is introduced as Holmes's long lost love, a *femme fatale* he never quite got over. The posters for the film, featuring Rachel McAdams as Adler, stress this aspect and add the tagline "dangerously alluring". The films play on the erotic tension between the two

leads, providing entertainment through the sexually charged games they play to outwit each other. On screen, the elision of female agency takes place through a paradoxical representation of Adler as supposedly strong and in control *because* of her overt sexuality and reliance on using her body as a weapon. Such use of a woman's body and sexuality – as a means of 'empowerment' – belongs squarely to the postfeminist discourse present in popular culture and media, especially since the 1990s.

In the British and American media, 'postfeminism' has been used from the late 1980s onwards to refer to a supposed obsolescence of feminism, pitting the stereotype of the older, serious, sour-faced second-wave feminist against the fun-loving, pole-dancing, carefree younger postfeminist who grew up listening to the 'girl power' band *Spice Girls*. The appeal of postfeminist discourse, present in a wide array of woman-oriented media – from magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* to popular TV shows like *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) – is based on the superficial appropriation of elements of feminist discourse for an individualistic consumerist notion of the self who now has the right to *choose* traditional gender roles and imagine herself strong and empowered when flaunting her sexuality. In this analysis I use the term postfeminism primarily in the sense that it has been deployed by feminist cultural and media critics such as Angela McRobbie, Rosalind Gill, and Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker:<sup>10</sup> as a form of anti-feminism (despite the 'feminism' in its name) that has been particularly prominent in contemporary media and popular culture in the West.<sup>11</sup> As McRobbie points out, the contemporary postfeminist landscape – social and cultural – is

marked by a new kind of anti-feminist sentiment which is different from simply being a question of cultural backlash against the seeming gains made by feminist activities. [...] Elements of feminism have been taken into account, and have been absolutely incorporated into political and institutional life. Drawing on a vocabulary that includes words like 'empowerment', and 'choice', these elements are then converted into a much more individualistic discourse, and they are deployed in this new guise, particularly in media and popular culture, but also by agencies of the state, as a kind of substitute for feminism. [...] 'Feminism' is instrumentalised,

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it is brought forward and claimed by Western governments, as a signal to the rest of the world that this is a key part of what freedom now means. (McRobbie 2009: 1)

Moreover, if we understand postfeminism as a sensibility, as Gill suggests, then a study of postfeminist media products can move beyond discussions about postfeminism's differences from, and abuses of, some fixed notion of "authentic feminism" (Gill 2007: 245). Instead, it can help us detect and analyse the ways in which contemporary media conceptualise and represent gender (Gill 2007: 244-245). Accordingly, Gill identifies a key characteristic of postfeminist representations of women's subjectivity and identity in the media:

it is the possession of a 'sexy body' that is presented as women's key (if not sole) source of identity. The body is presented simultaneously as women's source of power and as always already unruly and requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodelling (and consumer spending) in order to conform to ever narrower judgements of female attractiveness. (Gill 2007: 255)

This focus on the "sexy body" noted by Gill is the main characteristic of Adler's recent afterings. In Ritchie's films, Adler's 'empowerment' re-imagines the Victorian heroine as feisty, sexually and physically active, a heroine with her own agenda, reluctant to be tied down by the rules of propriety – yet, ultimately, a heroine whose agency is re-inscribed within a patriarchal system of power-play. Adler in Ritchie's films fails to be more than a saucy, sexy criminal. Her agency, heavily reliant on her use of sexuality and her own body, is, in the end, safely neutralised by the cold-blooded criminal mastermind Moriarty who turns out to be her employer. The sexual power of the female is contrasted to male rationality in this franchise, eventually being found wanting and summarily crushed.

Irene Adler's *faux* 'empowerment' is most visibly performed on the most superficial of levels or layers: by means of costume and clothing in general. In the very first scene in which she appears, she is depicted as stylishly dressed in a corseted magenta dress-suit and a matching pork-pie hat, awakening Holmes (Robert Downey Jr.) by cracking nuts with her

gloved hands, metaphorically announcing the beginning of the battle of the sexes they will perform for the rest of the narrative. Her next meeting with Holmes takes place in a hotel room, where she puts him off guard by performing a striptease behind a screen while he waits. Using her body and physical allure as a weapon, she drugs him and leaves him naked (save for a strategically placed cushion) and handcuffed to the bed, and his nude body is played for laughs in the next scene in which he wakes up.

What Ritchie's films share with *Sherlock*, Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss's TV series adaptation for BBC, is the fact that neither seem to be able to handle Holmes's restrained expression of admiration for Adler or her besting of Holmes. The most troubling aspect of these recent screen afterings, as Esther Inglis-Arkell bluntly summed up in her recent web article on Adler in Ritchie's films and *Sherlock* (2012), is that they both do away with Adler's autonomy.<sup>12</sup> Unlike in the story by Conan Doyle or the novel by Nelson Douglas, where she is first and foremost an opera singer, in Ritchie's films Adler becomes Holmes's nemesis primarily because she is an accomplished criminal who uses his weakness for her to get the better of him. Ritchie's films do away with Conan Doyle's unconventional strong woman, making room for other female objects of interest for this most virile of Sherlocks to date. Time will reveal whether she is brought back to life in the third sequel, currently in production.

In summation, Ritchie's re-visioning of Adler reduces her to Holmes's love interest and a sexy criminal who dies at the beginning of *The Game of Shadows* (2011), after having been manipulated and discarded by Holmes's enemy, Moriarty. Irene Adler in *Sherlock* suffers a similar postfeminist aftering. This reluctance to grant agency and eventual victory to the one and only female character to outsmart Holmes in Conan Doyle's texts certainly deserves careful inspection. A close study of the use of costume in *Sherlock*'s 'A Scandal in Belgravia' helps to expose the crux of the problem.

#### **4. The Naked Truth**

'A Scandal in Belgravia', an episode directed by Paul McGuigan, diminishes Adler's agency even more than do Ritchie's films. The opera singer, transformed into a private detective by Nelson Douglas, and into a criminal by Ritchie, here becomes a willowy dominatrix who blackmails her clients by photographing them in compromising positions. The juxtaposition

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of this supposedly gay glorified sex-worker, with the virginal asexual Sherlock (Benedict Cumberbatch) is the source of much humour and sexual innuendo in the ninety-minute episode.<sup>13</sup> Holmes and Adler's 'battle' is preceded by each character's careful search of their wardrobes for the perfect attire in which to face each other. In the scene of confrontation at her establishment, Sherlock arrives, in a nod to Conan Doyle's text, disguised as a clergyman, and ends up confronted by a nude Adler. By taking away his collar, a triumphant Adler pronounces, "we are both defrocked", adding that the biggest problem with disguise is that "however hard you try, it always is a self-portrait" (McGuigan, Moffat and Gatiss 2012: Episode 1, 24:28, 25:36). Sherlock, used to reading people by picking up on the details of their clothing and overall attire, is baffled: the naked body in front of him refuses to give in to his analytical eye, which is comically emphasised through a use of superimposed question marks on screen.

When asked by her assistant before this confrontation, "What are you going to wear?", Adler responds, "My battledress" (McGuigan, Moffat and Gatiss 2012: Episode 1, 23:12-23:16). The battledress turns out to be her own unclothed body and a pair of Christian Loubutin fetish shoes. This use of naked flesh can be observed as the use of "nudity as costume", as Heidi Brevik-Zender puts it in her discussion of Catherine Breillet's adaptation of Jules-Amédée Barbey d'Aurevilly's French nineteenth-century classic *Une vieille maîtresse* (Brevik-Zender 2012: 204). Adler's carefully applied lipstick in the colour of blood, her blood-red-soled Loubutin stilettos and diamond jewellery here function in the same way as the "unattached sleeves that cover Vellini's arms" in Breillat's adaptation, that is, as a reinforcement of "the suggestion of nakedness as a form of garment" (Brevik-Zender 2012: 215). Adler's naked body paradoxically turns out to be her most successful disguise, a veritable battledress that keeps her safe from Holmes's scrutinising gaze.

In her work on the use of clothes in film, Stella Bruzzi proposes that costume dramas should roughly be divided into two kinds: those that look *through* clothes and those that look *at* them (Bruzzi 1997: 35-6). The former category takes in the use of clothing as merely a marker of a particular era, augmenting the period's authenticity on screen, and thus inciting the viewer to look through them. In a similar vein, Clair Hughes has pointed out that "references to dress for both the reader and writer contribute to the 'reality effect': they lend tangibility and visibility to character and context" (Hughes

2005: 2). Hughes stresses that clothes “can also operate as the author’s personal sign-system, conscious or unconscious” (Hughes 2005: 2), which corresponds to Bruzzi’s proposed ‘other’ kind of costume films: those that draw the attention of the viewer to the clothes, making them look *at* the clothes and the hidden story that revolves around their interaction with the body and sexuality, often revealing fetishistic undercurrents (Bruzzi 1997: 36). In the process, the clothes draw attention to the eroticism usually hidden in the adapted text. If we understand ‘A Scandal in Belgravia’ as an example of the costume film that looks *at* the clothes, and if we study its use of nudity as costume, then a new reading of the Victorian story’s aftering comes to the surface.

‘A Scandal in Belgravia’ opens with Sherlock’s refusal to dress or to leave the house and indeed, he attempts to solve a case via a video-link without leaving his living room. Even when he is dragged willy-nilly to Buckingham Palace by secret agents, he insists on going in a bed sheet and stubbornly refuses to replace it with clothes. He succumbs only after an argument with Mycroft renders him partially exposed in front of Watson and the Queen’s employee. As in Ritchie’s film, Holmes’s nudity on screen is played for laughs. However, here it is additionally used as a sign of non-conformism, and in order to characterise him as petulant, obstinate and, as such, child-like, which will quickly be associated with his supposed ignorance in matters of sexuality when Mycroft discusses Adler’s business website, *The Woman*. Holmes is further associated with sexual inexperience through his choice of disguise (a clergyman, immediately defrocked and powerless) and Moriarty’s nickname for him, ‘the Virgin’. As such, he serves as Adler’s opposite and a kind of double, for she is unequivocally contrasted with him as *the* whore in all but the name.

The appropriation depicts Adler’s use of nudity as intentionally manipulative, whereby her naked body serves as her most powerful weapon. In this fashion, she is characterised, in a most stereotypical manner, as a temptress and a *femme fatale*. This is further emphasised with her titillating attire, consisting – at the beginning of the episode – of a series of see-through negligees and sexy underwear.<sup>14</sup> Her playing at being a detective herself takes place symbolically, when she covers herself up with Holmes’s overcoat at Watson’s bidding, stiletto shoe in hand. She attempts to keep up with Holmes’s line of deduction, but only succeeds in solving the puzzle after she literally beats him into submission. At the end of the episode, when

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blackmailing Mycroft, she further proves that she lacks the ability to act on her own and as Sherlock's equal: "I had a bit of help. Jim Moriarty sends his love. I had all this stuff, and never knew what to do with it. Thank God for the consulting criminal!" (McGuigan, Moffat and Gatiss 2012: Episode 1, 01:19:02-01:19:14).

The 'updating' of Adler as a dominatrix and a sexual woman gives her only the temporary power of the female body as fetish and a very 'Victorian' narrative destiny. As soon as she 'over-reaches' her limits of agency as a sexualised body, Adler promptly falls/fails, is humiliated and punished. Hence, in her last appearance in the episode, she is reduced to the most oppressed image of the female body in Western media: that of the hijab-wearing (Muslim) woman, waiting either to die or to be rescued by a male hand. Not only does this image confirm her loss of agency, it also reaffirms what McRobbie terms the postfeminist gendered "boundaries between the West and the rest" (McRobbie 2009: 1), curiously introducing belated Orientalist notions about the colonial space not present in the story, which I will discuss in more detail below. The contemporary Holmes cannot be bested by a woman; moreover, instead of possessing the mind "of the most resolute of men" (Conan Doyle 1994: 13), the contemporary detective's female antagonist is now reduced to a sexualised body which is, to paraphrase Holmes's comment at the end of the episode, dominated by sentiment.

##### **5. From Nudity to Hijab: Neo-Victorian Postfeminism**

The recent afterings of Irene Adler should be read as postfeminist and are all the more problematic because they appear to be superficially liberating due to the abundant use of sexuality and nudity. In her recent screen afterlives, Adler becomes a character who relies first and foremost on her feminine wiles. Like so many other postfeminist heroines, beginning with Carrie Bradshaw and her posse in HBO's series *Sex and the City*, she may be financially independent, sexy, and sexual, but her freedom does not imply social power. Instead, the postfeminist woman's freedom is coded as freedom to consume (clothes, shoes, underwear, men) and eventually to conform to social rules (or else, like *Sex and the City*'s Samantha, to get cancer). The postfeminist Adler's power consists only in the power of her naked body as a weapon and, as such, depends on her will to use it primarily

to blackmail people (rather than for her own pleasure) – and on her reliance on powerful male figures such as Moriarty whom she works for.

The stress on Adler as a dominatrix who tricks Holmes into submission by administering a drug and wielding a whip, wipes away the agency granted to her by Conan Doyle in the late Victorian text. Whereas Conan Doyle's Adler is the only woman who beat Holmes at his own game by outsmarting him, in McGuigan-Moffat-Gatiss's BBC TV series she becomes just a dominatrix who literally *beats* him. Adler appears to be reduced to the worst of the late Victorian and turn-of-the-century stereotypes put forward by Otto Weininger in *Sex and Character* (1903) – the highly sexed female body preoccupied with sex and relying on sexuality as a means of control over men.<sup>15</sup> This reduction is completed in the BBC aftering when Sherlock beats Adler at her own game of blackmail and humiliates her by rejecting her playful attempts at seduction. And that is not all: the humiliated, beaten, and prospect-less Adler is, at the very end of the episode, reduced to a crouching damsel in distress, miraculously saved from death by Holmes himself.

The degradation of Adler develops visually through the use of costumes on-screen. By the end of the episode, the dangerously sexual female nude body of the metropolitan centre is displaced into a Pakistani desert and transformed into a kneeling powerless bundle of indigo-blue wraps that set off her tear-sodden face. The luminous skin of her 'battledress', of the naked female body-as-weapon, is supplanted by a crestfallen figure in a hijab. This narrative use of the colonial space eerily echoes the one Elleke Boehmer highlighted as a standard exit strategy in Victorian novels:

*Where all else failed there remained the exit-route to the Empire. In distant lands, as well as punishment and trials, remunerative prospects were to be had, and a hoped-for restitution of fortunes [...]. While fallen women redeem themselves and Micawber can become magistrate, gender and class proprieties are preserved in Britain" (Boehmer 1995: 27-28, added emphasis).*

In a stereotypically Victorian fashion that paradoxically does not even feature in Conan Doyle's text, Adler's use of her own body as a means of



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power turns her into a fallen woman who has to be punished, banished to the former colonial space, and saved by the hero.

The 'sexsation' of the screen adaptation performs the superficial liberation of the Victorian text by putting the nudity and sexuality in, but it comes nowhere close to acknowledging the agency and autonomy of the adapted Victorian heroine by allowing her a happy ending on her own terms. Moreover, the sensational use of nudity, counterpointed by the even more sensational melodramatic use of hijab and the (ex)colonial space at the end of the show, performs a suspect turn, which brings us to the ideological connotations of such use of 'sexsation' on screen.

Warning of the dangerous political implications behind the conflation of "liberty with sexual liberation, or knowledge with sexual knowledge", Kohlke stresses that

[s]uch reductionism extends to international relations, as in the appropriation of the figure of the Afghan woman, shrouded in her *burqa*, to help justify the U.S. led NATO intervention in Afghanistan, a move that might be compared to the Victorian's treatment of the Indian practice of *suttee*. As Emily Haddad points out, "[m]uch European condemnation of oriental tyranny arose (and still does) from moral indignation at the presumed oriental subordination of women." (Kohlke 2008: 354)<sup>16</sup>

The unexpected appearance in *Sherlock* of this orientalist figure of the veiled woman – as visual shorthand for oppressed women of the former colonial space which also, implicitly, carries a justification for recent neo-colonial military interventions – also serves to reinforce the postfeminist notion of freedom defined by the image of an overtly sexual Western woman. If, as Kohlke suggests, contemporary writers of neo-Victorian fiction use the Victorian past in the same way that the Victorian writers used the Orient – as the space of the Other – contemporary screenwriters of *Sherlock* return to Orientalist notions of colonial space and interpolate them in their updating of this late Victorian text.

*Sherlock* uses the Orientalist image of the oppressed woman within the (ex)colonial space, alongside continuous mention of Watson's status as an Afghanistan war veteran, further stressing the parallels between the past

and the present, thereby questioning the idea of progress. In the intertextual manner of historiographic metafiction, *Sherlock* interrogates the extent of our knowledge about the Victorian past as well as the notion of our distance from it. In this sense, 'A Scandal in Belgravia' and Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes* films are neo-Victorian due to their apparent drive to re-write and re-vision the Victorian text(s). However, as playful and parodic as these allusions to parallels between the Victorian past and our present may appear at first, their parody – often overlaid with humour and irony – is without noticeable emancipatory political bite, and ultimately supports the status quo.

Moreover, both 'A Scandal in Belgravia' and Ritchie's films use the spectacle of the female body and the sexualisation of the narrative to perform a disturbingly straightforward crippling of the subjectivity and agency of the Victorian heroine. By staging a superficial liberation of the Victorian heroine through the on-screen use of nudity and sexuality, contemporary adaptations reinforce the stereotypical view of the Victorian era as repressed both in terms of gender and sexuality, while at the same time they distract the audience's attention from its own "retro-sexist" (Whelehan 2000: 65) conservative treatment of women's agency. Seen in this light, these afterings may be described as 'neo-Victorian' in the less progressive sense of the word, as it is used in popular media.

Both afterings of Irene Adler stage a contemporary, 'updated' version of Conan Doyle's narrative through their sexualised use of nudity and the sexualisation of Adler, which can in part be explained by the postfeminist bent of contemporary media, and in part by production demands. After all, both *Sherlock* and Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes* franchise are cultural products addressed to the global market, advertised both as novelties (and hence, defining themselves *against* the popular expectations of a Victorian text as well as previous adaptations of the Holmes canon) *and* as adaptations of Conan Doyle's *oeuvre*, using the Sherlock Holmes name as a recognisable literary and cultural brand. As such, they also claim some of the 'cool' and cultural capital that Conan Doyle's detective stories possess as examples of cult literature. Furthermore, expectations of the detective series as a genre rely on the concept of the detective as an unbeatable (if occasionally fallible) genius, particularly when the detective in question is Sherlock Holmes.<sup>17</sup> Such generic demands, entwined with the

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persistent presence of the postfeminist suspicion towards feminism in the media, result in these stunted re-visionings of female subjectivity.

If adaptations are popular because, as Linda Hutcheon proposes, they offer the comfort of repetition with a difference and say as much about our own time as about the adapted text's time of creation (Hutcheon 2006: 114-115), then these afterings of Adler signal that we are going through (yet another) neo-conservative era. That the myths about the Victorian era – articulated so memorably by Margaret Thatcher on her campaign trail – still have a firm grip on the contemporary imagination can be clearly seen from the way these recent adaptations treat Conan Doyle's late Victorian text and its gender-bending heroine. What is more, Adler's postfeminist screen afterlives indicate that 'neo-Victorian' may keep its ambiguous, twofold – and fundamentally contradictory – meaning for a while longer, encompassing both a re-visioned liberating re-writing of the Victorian past and a desire for re-membering the one-time gender 'certainties' that it supposedly still represents.

### Notes

1. According to *The Internet Movie Database*, the character of Adler appears in a number of films and TV shows before 1990, ranging from the more straightforward adaptations (e.g. in the 1984 episode 'A Scandal in Bohemia' of Granada's TV series *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, with Jeremy Brett as Holmes and Gayle Hunnicutt as Adler) to more whimsical appropriations, such as a very camp TV film *Sherlock Holmes in New York* (1976) with Roger Moore as Holmes and Charlotte Rampling as Adler. She also receives a passing mention, in order to create a framing narrative, in *Dressed to Kill* (1946) with Basil Rathbone as Holmes.
2. On making the Victorians sexy and sexual in recent screen adaptations of classic novels see, for example, Sadoff 2010: 149-195. For a study of the representation of Victorian female subjectivity on screen through a coded use of period costume, see Primorac 2012.
3. Notable exceptions are Julia Kinzler's article on the biopic about young queen Victoria, 'Visualising Victoria: Gender, Genre and History in *The Young Victoria* (2009)' and Kara M. Manning's "'That's the Effect of Living Backwards": Patterns of Technological Change, Lewis Carroll's *Alice Books*,

and Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland*, both published in *Neo-Victorian Studies* 4:2 (2011).

4. See, for example, Liora Brosh's *Screening Novel Women: From British Domestic Fiction to Film* (2008) or Dianne Sadoff's *Victorian Vogue: British Novels on Screen* (2010). Hila Shachar's recent monograph on adaptations of *Wuthering Heights* entitled *Cultural Afterlives and Screen Adaptations of Classic Literature: Wuthering Heights and Company* (2012) dedicates a chapter to a neo-Victorian adaptation.
5. See, for example, the introduction to Cora Kaplan's book *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism* (2007), especially page 2, or the introduction to Heilmann and Llewellyn's *Neo-Victorianism* (2010) where filmic and audio/visual examples of neo-Victorianism are mentioned as part of the phenomenon (especially pages 4 through 6).
6. For example, in his book *Victorians in the Rearview Mirror* (2007) Simon Joyce dedicates a chapter to the heritage film industry; Cora Kaplan devotes a chapter to Jane Campion's film *The Piano* (1993) in her book *Victoriana*; and in their *Neo-Victorianism* Heilmann and Llewellyn devote part of chapter 5 to Christopher Nolan's film *The Prestige* (2006), an adaptation of Christopher Priest's eponymous novel.
7. Christian Gutleben pointed out a similar effect of the central place that characters and narratives deemed marginal in Victorian fiction have in contemporary British novels set in the Victorian era. However, Gutleben connects this focus on the Victorian marginal figures and narratives with political correctness of the 1980s and 1990s, the decades in which most of the novels he discusses were published: "[r]epeated from one novel to another, these politically correct perspectives, far from being subversive or innovative, become predictable, not to say redundant" (Gutleben 2001:169).
8. The greeting serves as the title of Carole Nelson Douglas's novel discussed in this text.
9. *Sherlock Holmes in New York* (1976) even goes so far as to suggest that Irene Adler's illegitimate son, Scott, may be Sherlock's offspring. The TV series *Elementary*, a modern-day appropriation of Sherlock Holmes set in New York, starring Jonny Lee Miller as Holmes and Lucy Liu as a female Dr. Watson, also uses Irene Adler as the detective's long lost love interest. Moreover, the *femme fatale* of Holmes's youth in this show also turns out to be – spoiler alert! – Moriarty. However, Holmes overcomes this Adler/Moriarty, too.
10. See McRobbie's *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (2009), Gill's *Gender and the Media* (2007), and Tasker and Negra's

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edited collection, *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (2007).

11. Susan J. Douglas, for example, finds the term problematic and suggests instead the expression “enlightened sexism” (Douglas 2010: 9), which is, in a way, an updated take on what a decade earlier Imelda Whelehan referred to as “retro-sexism”: sexism cloaked in a knowing coat of irony (Whelehan 2000: 65).
12. The web piece, entitled simply ‘Why can’t any recent Sherlock Holmes adaptation get Irene Adler right?’, was posted on 4 January 2013, after this particular analysis of Adler had been written and presented at the *Neo-Victorian Networks* conference held at the University of Amsterdam on 15-17 June 2012. The very fact that this topic is being analysed online, and that it elicits a heated debate in its comments section, further testifies to the troubling nature of Adler’s recent screen afterings – especially if we look at the author’s impassioned response to the afterings. In her angry analysis of the differences between the Victorian text and its recent adaptations, Inglis-Arkeell contrasts the Victorian heroine as “a completely honourable person”, through which Doyle shows that a “clever, unconventional, take-charge, and seductive woman is, unreservedly, a good thing”, to McGuigan and Ritchie’s “golddigger” and an “opportunistic seductress who’s waiting to unleash her apparently lethal sexuality on the hero” (Inglis-Arkeell 2013: n.p.).
13. Even though Adler provocatively says that she is gay as a retort to Watson’s statement that he himself is not (McGuigan, Moffat and Gatiss 2012: Episode 1, 55:15), the series does not develop this idea any further; her having a female PA/driver hardly proves anything in itself.
14. The clothes serve as a point of interactive entry for ‘prosumers’ – the show’s fans understood as consumers that participate in the production of the show’s meaning – thanks to clever camera work and product placement. This is further encouraged through an interactive blog dedicated to the promotion of the clothes and other items used in the series, *Wear Sherlock* (<http://wearsherlock.tumblr.com/>).
15. Weininger’s *Sex and Character* perfectly encapsulates misogynous views at the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century. Compare the following notorious claims: “To put it bluntly, *man possesses sexual organs; her sexual organs possess woman*. [...] And so it happens that a man can know about his sexuality, whilst a woman is unconscious of it and can in all good faith deny it, because *she is nothing but sexuality, because she is sexuality herself*”; later Weininger asserts, that “[a] female genius is a contradiction in terms, for

genius is simply intensified, perfectly developed, universally conscious maleness” (Weininger 1906: 92, 189, original emphasis). In other words, the most capable thinking woman will only ever be a mere shadow of a man: education and culture are practically wasted on her. Hailed as a genius in his own short lifetime, Weininger never lived to witness the popularity of his views and their application in the early twentieth-century writing against women’s suffrage and the women’s movement.

16. Kohlke here cites Haddad’s *Orientalist Poetics: The Islamic Middle East in Nineteenth-Century English and French Poetry* (2002).
17. The same principle can be seen at work in American modern-day versions of Sherlock Holmes, as the doctor in *House M. D.*, or as a New York based sleuth in the TV series *Elementary*. Even the earlier afterings, such as the US films with Basil Rathbone as Holmes, could not depict Holmes as fallible *on-screen*; note, for instance, how Irene Adler appears in *Dressed to Kill* only in dialogue, as an off-screen intertextual reference to Holmes’s *on-screen* besting of (another) *femme fatale*.

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