A Detective Made of Stern Stuff:
Review of Dominique Gracia, *The Meinir Davies Casebook*

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Dominique Gracia, *The Meinir Davies Casebook*. London: MX Publishing, 2023.
Paperback ISBN: 978-1-80424-252-0, £15.62 (HB)

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In his essay entitled 'The Simple Art of Murder', first published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in December 1944 (and later partially revised), Raymond Chandler gave a clear definition of his ideal detective: "He is the hero. He is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man […]. He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world" (Chandler 1946: 237). In this piece, there is a complete identification between masculinity ("man" is repeated three times in the first sentence) and detection, without any possible alternative. Chandler's statement seems to confirm what characterised nineteenth-century detective fiction, since male detectives such as Edgard Allan Poe's Dupin, Charles Dickens's Inspector Bucket, Wilkie Collins's Sergeant Cuff and, in particular, Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes silenced, as it were, with their dominating textual presence other female detectives. These 'marginalised' female investigators – which have partially disappeared from the publishing market, save for a few exceptions – included, among others, Loveday Brooke in R. L. Pirkis's stories, Dorcas Dene in George Robert Sims's *Dorcas Dene, Detective* (1897), Mrs. Paschal in William Stephens Hayward's *Revelations of a Lady Detective* (1864), Mrs. Gladden in Andrew Forrester Jr.'s *The Female Detective* (1864), or Lady Molly in Baroness Orczy's *Lady Molly of Scotland Yard* (1910), not to mention American detectives such as Amelia Butterworth and Clarice Dyke, created by Anna Katharine Green and Harry Rockwood respectively.[1] The reasons according to which women decided to

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.11261903

become detectives in such Victorian fictions vary, and these narratives offered various answers to Birgitta Berglund's question:

> In what circumstances is it acceptable – even laudable – for a woman to do a man's work? Answer: When the man is not there to do the job, and the woman does it reluctantly and out of a sense of duty rather than for fun, money or fame. (Berglund 2000: 142)

Although women were not officially employed as police detectives until the 1920s, they supported police or private detective agencies because – unlike male detectives – they were more acceptable 'intruders' of family spaces (and secrets) than their male counterparts, of whom there was more general suspicion. In Dominique Gracia's short story collection *The Meinir Davies Casebook* (2023), the writer seems to respond to these partially silenced stories by putting a female investigator at the centre of the detecting adventures, one who is an ideal literary heiress to those 'marginalised' figures, and who unapologetically decides "to do the job" for economic reasons and financial independence. Also in terms of style, Gracia aptly imitates her Victorian male and female predecessors in the literary field of detective fiction.

Following a typical nineteenth-century narrative strategy – examples range from Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859-60) to Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Master of Ballantrae: A Winter's Tale* (1889) – the Preface presents the stories as being accidentally found in an old metal storage box and collected by an anonymous editor through her grandmother, the latter being the daughter of the titular female detective named Meinir (or 'May') Davies. In this respect, there is a familial bond that directly connects the unnamed editor – who admits to having selected some of the narratives included in the mysterious box, while leaving out others – and the detective herself. In the Preface and in the ensuing adventures, we are informed that Davies originally came from south Wales, to which she returned in 1910. Like the Sherlock Holmes stories, filtered through John Watson's perspective, the events are not narrated by the detective but by a scribe later revealed (in 'The Case of the Anonymous Writer') as Charles Booth, the real-life social investigator, who also appears as a character in some of the stories. Unlike Watson, Booth never accompanies Davies on her investigations; in typical

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.11261903

postmodern fashion, readers are told that Booth is a friend of the writer George Robert Sims, the actual creator of the fictional female detective Dorcas Dene. Finally, the Preface anticipates one of the (neo-Victorian) peculiarities of this casebook, since Davies's investigations bring her into contact with other fictional detectives, including Sherlock Holmes and Dorcas Dene, who interact with 'May' in this para-Victorian historical universe.

One of the idiosyncrasies of Gracia's stories is the emergence of Meinir Davies's origin, nature, and personal history as if it were another detective narrative that runs parallel to the stories, in the sense that readers are not offered a complete picture of this 'petticoated detective' (an expression used by Hayward's earlier mentioned Mrs. Paschal in *Revelations of a Lady Detective*) at the outset. On the contrary, information on the protagonist's life is disseminated piecemeal in all of the adventures included in this Casebook, so that readers become in turn detectives of Davies's vicissitudes and even mysteries (for instance, whether she is a real widow or not).[2] Among other facts, we discover that Davies previously worked at Clyde Montagu's agency as a private detective – occasionally collaborating with the London police – and then decided to become a schoolmistress at Richmond, following Booth's advice. Her cases range from thefts to investigations involving Members of Parliament and local bishops, from spiritualism to colonial vengeance and architectural mysteries. Nevertheless, unlike the majority of neo-Victorian detective narratives, including ones involving female investigators as, e.g., Lee Jackson's *The Last Pleasure Garden* (2006) and George Mann's *The Affinity Bridge* (2008), Davies's investigations rarely deal with physical violence. In a way, Gracia is not interested in offering her readers sensational stories but rather in presenting an intelligent and sharp professional woman dealing with 'ordinary' cases that, nonetheless, delve deeply into nineteenth-century issues related in particular – but not exclusively – to the condition of women.

The Meinir Davies Casebook opens with 'The Case of the Missing Mother', set in London, District 11 (Poplar and Limehouse), and relates to the mysterious disappearance of the mother of a girl named Clara O'Donoghue (who will also reappear in another story entitled 'The Vicar's Conundrum', concerning the bride-to-be of the Bishop of Stepney). Davies, who at the time of the story's setting still works at Montagu's agency, is contacted by Police Constable Jones to discover the reasons for this disappearance and for the presence of a strange odd-coloured eyed man, who

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.11261903

seems to be somehow connected to what happened. In this story and elsewhere, Gracia closely imitates the typical narrative style of late-Victorian detective narratives. Sometimes, however, she includes expressions and references that would appear 'inappropriate' in the nineteenth century but are perfectly suited to a modern audience, such as "floozy" (Gracia 2023a: 11), or an allusion to "the intensity of [female] relationships" that are "difficult to manage, especially over years together" in the "close quarters" of colleges (Gracia 2023a: 84), which seems to refer to eventual lesbian relationships in the already mentioned 'The Case of the Anonymous Writer'. As suggested by its title – which calls to mind the central mystery of Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868), reputed as the first detective novel in English literature – 'The Mystery of the Diamond Earrings' focuses on the disappearance of the precious diamond earrings owned by a Miss Tavistock. Davies, who has been working for only three months as a House Mistress at the Richmond school for young ladies, is informed of the theft by one of her pupils, a certain Miss Sims, a name that reminds readers of George Robert Sims, the creator of the female detective (and former actress) Dorcas Dene.[3]

'The Mystery of the Diamond Earrings' is the first story in which Davies collaborates with the Victorian arch-detective Holmes to solve a case. When introducing her to Watson during her visit at 221B Baker Street, Holmes remarks that Davies is "one of us", adding that she is "[a] detective made of stern stuff. You might better shake her hand than tip your hat" (Gracia 2023a: 52). However, in this as well as in all the investigations in which Davies is involved, Gracia's female detective relies on bodily perception rather than mere Holmes-like rational thinking. By using sight, touch, hearing, and smell, Davies adopts a counter-detecting method to achieve her aims, which is in line with Gracia's critical reflections on Victorian female detectives, according to which "the bodies of women" represent "a new organising principle" (Gracia 2020: 57) in nineteenth-century female detective narratives. As it were, in *The Meinir Davies Casebook*, Gracia applies her conclusions on the peculiar nature of professional investigations led by women to her own fictional creation – and it is, in particular, thanks to Davies's female abilities that this case can be solved, whereas Holmes admits his failure as "number thirty-nine" in the "tally of the cases whose solutions have, so far, escaped [him]" (Gracia 2023a: 48).

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.11261903

According to Gracia's reconfiguration of the paradigm of detection, women are not the mere 'objects' of the male detective's gaze but become the scrutinising 'subjects'. In her feminist analysis of novels featuring female detectives, Kathleen Gregory Klein remarks on this important epistemological change, because the presence of these figures "pushes off-center the whole male/female, public/private, intellect/emotion, physical strength/weakness dichotomy" (Klein 1988: 4).[4] Even when they are the specific object of (male and female) scrutiny, women's traditional role and condition is questioned. Emblematically, the women described in Gracia's collection almost turn into a parodic representation of what they are supposed to be according to a typically male perspective. For instance, in the case of 'The Vicar's Conundrum', the disinterred corpse of Lady Ulrica turns out to be a waxwork figure, transforming a supposed murder into a pantomime and a carnivalesque scene:

> The skin was of a similar shade and tone, and the lips pale, so that the only colour in the whole coffin was the dark waves of the lady's hair […].
>
> 'This is a vile threat,' the Bishop replied, and Lady Shaw began to realise – the future tense and metaphor of 'will be dead' suddenly telling – that the body in the coffin was not a real one. Rather, it was an elaborate waxwork in the form of Lady Ulrica. (Gracia 2023a: 105)

Here Davies reverses the traditional view of the woman's body as a perfect (dead) work of art, studied in particular by Elisabeth Bronfen in *Over Her Dead Body* (1992). Indeed, the reproduction of Lady Ulrica's body as a waxwork represents a parody of one of the emblems of the patriarchal view of female submission.

After having casually appeared at the end of 'The Vicar's Conundrum', Holmes features again in 'The Mystery of Mrs. Holmes', in which we discover that Conan Doyle's detective was married to a woman named Jane, a former American actress and an assertive independent person interested in opening a factory in London. Holmes becomes Davies's equal partner in 'The Case of the Anonymous Writer', where he alludes to Davies's successful solution of the mystery described in 'The Case on Christmas Steps' (thus also creating connections between the various adventures). 'The Case

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of the Anonymous Writer' deals with another aspect of the diverse declinations of femininity in the late Victorian age: the condition of women in educational institutions. In this case, a series of anonymous, slanderous, and offending articles against Miss Angela Shawcross, a prominent leader within the National Union of Women's Suffrage Society, reveal the subtle tensions that characterise the lives of the women attending colleges (such as Girton in Cambridge). 'The Case of Castell Coach', which describes an 'architectural' mystery related to a missing manuscript and features the artist Frederic Leighton as one of its characters, is set when Davies still works at Captain Clyde Montagu's detecting agency.[5] This story also recounts some of the events related to the detective's past, including her service as Miss Gwilt – a possible ironic allusion to Wilkie Collins's female villain in *Armadale* (1864-66) – and the presumed death of her husband in an accident on the Great Western Railway. The latter precipitated Davies's desire to pursue a 'professional' career as a detective, a decision that signals her female assertiveness and her search for independence, motivated by practical and down-to-earth (rather than sentimental) reasons: "Detection was not a glamorous profession […]. But Montagu paid well, and the work offered its own sort of reward" (Gracia 2023a: 112).[6]

Other stories in the Casebook range across further typical neo-Victorian concerns. 'The Adventure of the Red Cross', in which Holmes collaborates again with Davies, begins as a peculiar investigation of a series of red signs painted on the steps and then on the door of St. Mathias Church, which are revealed to be related to colonial crimes connected (albeit indirectly) to Reverend William's past as a former doctor and soldier in Egypt. In line with Conan Doyle's ambivalent handling of British colonial rule, in this short story too the past seems to haunt the present in the shape of a colonial subject seeking justice or vengeance. The main theme of 'The Case of the Ivory Skull' is spiritualism, which represented a fashionable obsession for wealthy Victorians as well as for intellectuals and artists ranging from Alfred Tennyson to Conan Doyle himself, and which has been explored by many neo-Victorian works, such as Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996), Sarah Waters's *Affinity* (1999), John Harwood's *The Séance* (2008), and Neil Spring's *The Ghost Hunters* (2013).[7] In this story, Davies's interest in the destiny, difficulties, passions, and even cravings of living people (rather than in ghostly apparitions) comes to the fore, in particular concerning Laura Levy, known as 'Madame Levonski'. In the words of Davies's scribe Mr. Booth,

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"[a]s a detective, the behaviour of people was Meinir's study. And it seemed to her that the salons and parlour rooms where Spiritualists performed were remarkable tableaux in which one could study the human mind" (Gracia 2023a: 220).

The collection's last story, 'The Adventure of the Bloomsbury Cupboard' (set in Great Orme Street, close to the British Museum) includes Holmes alongside the American Pinkerton's detective agency in the only case that features an actual murder and a villainous Italian named Giuseppe Gorgiano, who – like Count Fosco in Collins's *The Woman in White* – is the member of a secret society, and lodges together with his wife Emilia at Mrs. Warren's boarding house. Davies's ability to establish a 'sympathetic' relationship with people, especially with the women involved in the case (unlike Holmes's detached approach), represents the key to her professional success: "Meinir winced internally when Emilia described the lascivious advances of Gorgiano, imploring and forceful. Women encountered such brutes every day, and they benefited little from each other's cringing *sympathy*" (Gracia 2023a: 248, added emphasis).[8] This latter reflection is another example of the interplay between Gracia's study of female detectives in Victorian fiction – characterized, according to her, by their physical and emotional attachment to the victims – and the 'sympathetic' traits of the protagonist of *The Meinir Davies Casebook*. In Gracia's own words, "two of the most important bodily tools that define the female detective's functions [are] physical proximity […], and the relation between active, direct observation and intuition (often encapsulated in the term 'sympathy')" (Gracia 2020: 59). Hence female detectives may be reputed as important liminal figures in Victorian criminal history and detective fiction because of their sometimes antithetical roles as emotionally involved individuals and professional workers, as representatives both of traditional nineteenth-century social institutions (family, motherhood) and of the future development of women's roles in society. For Arlene Young, the professional female detective "is a fascinating anomaly in Victorian popular literature", who fuses "some of the most pressing issues regarding women in the 1860s and 1890s with one of the most inventive forms of popular literature of the period" (Young 2008: 26). Whereas women detectives first appear "when social commentators are pondering issues of women's redundancy and subjection", they later resurfaced "when the New Woman seems poised to take on the world and any job that writers are prepared to assign to her"

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(Young 2008: 26).[9] Self-evidently, Gracia's Davies is another such progressive New Woman, a prototype of later twentieth-century feminist emancipation.

At the end of 'The Adventure of the Bloomsbury Cupboard', Booth informs his readers that the same events described in this story have been reported by Dr. John Watson in 'The Adventure of the Red Circle', included in Conan Doyle's anthology *His Last Bow* (1911). This is a typically neo-Victorian example of a narration filtered by an alternative and 'marginal' perspective, following the lead of Jean Rhys's iconic *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) or Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* (1997), which revises *Great Expectations* (1861) by using the point of view of a character inspired by Abel Magwitch. Whereas women as characters are usually silenced in Holmesian stories (where they only appear as victims or as 'exceptional' enemies in the case of Irene Adler), recent reconfigurations of Conan Doyle's narratives have tended to present a female counter-version of Victorian detection.[10] By way of an example, one might think of *Enola Holmes* (2020) and *Enola Holmes 2* (2022) films, based on the book series penned by Nancy Springer. Accordingly, as Stacy Gillis notes, while Conan Doyle's stories featuring Holmes speak "to the anxieties" about women's roles "in both public and private, as well as to the complexities of the male response", these same anxieties are also "the focus of the staggering number of global multimedia adaptations that have populated the cultural afterlife of the world's first consulting detective over the past century" (Gillis 2019: 79). As Booth writes at the end of *The Meinir Davies Casebook* in 'The Adventure of the Bloomsbury Cupboard' – commenting upon Watson's alternative narration of the same events – his own account "aims to remind the reader that there are many sides to each story, and every author must present it how they think best for their own audience" (Gracia 2023a: 256). All in all, in this collection Gracia presents not just 'another side' to those investigations that were reputed to be an exclusively male endeavour during the Long Nineteenth Century, but also 'another side' to the history of the period's professional female detectives and their desire to assert their own individuality and investigatory competence.

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Notes

1. I refer mainly to professional (or demi-professional) female detectives in Victorian fiction. However, there were also many female 'amateur' detectives, including Anne Rodway in Wilkie Collins's 'The Diary of Anne Rodway' (1856), Marian Halcombe in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859-60), Eleanor Vane in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Eleanor's Victory* (1863), and Valeria Woodville in Wilkie Collins's *The Law and the Lady* (1875), just to name a few. Non-professional female detectives are also present in neo-Victorian novels such as *The Dark Clue* (2001) by James Wilson, a sequel to *The Woman in White*.
2. Created by the American writer Tasha Alexander, Lady Emily Ashton's neo-Victorian series (with twenty-three instalments published so far) is another example of a widow-as-detective. However, unlike Meinir Davies, Lady Ashton is an aristocrat and the wife of the late Viscount Philip Ashton; therefore, for Lady Ashton detection is not properly a job. According to Nadine Muller, in Emily's character "Alexander merges two figures – the female detective and the widow – whose roles and representations in mid- and late-Victorian literature, art, and culture signified their dangerous potential to uphold as well as disrupt traditional gender conventions" (Muller 2012: 100).
3. George Robert Sims's fictional detective will also collaborate with Davies in 'The Case on Christmas Steps', centred on the 'improper' night walks of the daughter of a renowned politician. Like Dorcas Dene, whose adventures are collected in Sims's *Dorcas Dene, Detective*, Meinir Davies uses various disguises to access the houses and the private lives of the people she investigates. In 'The Case of the Diamond Lizards', based on a strange exchange of a lizard-shaped brooch and set in London's legal world, Davies also meets Mr. Dene, Dorcas's husband.
4. In his study of those female writers whom he calls "Sherlock's Sisters", Joseph A. Kestner concludes that the surveillance practices of Holmesian detectives are replaced by female detectives who challenge them by enacting a form of "female control through the gaze", thus rectifying "some particular abuse of power" (Kestner 2003: 21).
5. 'A Question of Time' is another story that goes back to Davies's past job as a detective at Montagu's agency and is centred on a lost precious watch. In this adventure, Davies conducts part of her investigation via bicycle, another emblem of (female) autonomy and independence in the late-nineteenth century.
6. Concerning professional female detectives (both in fiction and real life) in the mid-to-late Victorian age, Lucy Sussex argues that "[these] women are

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complete professionals – married to their work and enjoying it. Such a notion was as disturbing to Victorian convention as the lower classes gaining power as police" (Sussex 2010: 76). Molly Robertson-Kirk is another example of a professional female detective in Emmuska Orczy's *Lady Molly of Scotland Yard* (1910); in this case, Lady Molly agrees to work at Scotland Yard's 'Female Department' to save her husband, accused of murder from unjust incarceration.

7. Like the notorious real-life murderer Grace Marks, victim of a possible spirit possession in Atwood's biofiction, Harry Price (1881-1948) was an actual historical subject, who became famous as a psychic investigator. Although the central haunting of Spring's novel takes place in Borley Rectory, Essex, in 1940, Price's investigation covers supernatural events at the site reaching back to 1863, thus loosely qualifying *The Ghost Hunters* as neo-Victorian.
8. In an imaginary interview with Meinir Davies, Dominque Gracia asks her character the reasons for the appeal of crime-solving, apart from money. Meinir replies: "Sometimes there is a thrill in the chase, when you have a particularly cruel or prolific offender at hand, but otherwise the *thing that draws me into these cases is simply compassion*. Being an investigator gives you a chance to help people, to right wrongs but also to protect others from future wrongs. Once you get used to that, it's a difficult habit to shake" (Gracia 2023b, added emphasis).
9. Patricia Craig and Mary Cadogan try to discern some of the reasons why (male and female) authors choose to make their detectives female: some of their answers confirm a certain stereotyping of female characters in Victorian fiction at large: "novelty; dramatic effect (making the least-likely-person the sleuth instead of the culprit); in order to justify an unorthodox method of detecting; because the figure could be presented fancifully (which suited the mood of popular fiction up to the 1920s), whimsically or comically (the latter in keeping with the spirit of light writing of a later era); and because nosiness – fundamental requirement of the detective – is often considered a feminine trait" (Craig and Cadogan 1986: 13).
10. There are other examples of female professional detectives in neo-Victorian fiction (and TV series), but the most emblematic one is probably represented by Sara Howard, a young and aspiring police detective (and future private investigator) in Caleb Carr's series *The Alienist* (1994) and *The Angel of Darkness* (1997), who collaborates with Dr. Laszlo Kreizler, a criminal psychologist assisting the New York City police commissioner, Theodore Roosevelt. In the beginning, Sarah has to face discrimination and prejudice in

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the police community, but later on she is respected for her professional skill. The series, which has also been adapted for the screen, is set in New York at the end of the nineteenth century and features real historical figures such as Roosevelt and J. P. Morgan.

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.11261903