The (Neo-)Victorian Sherlock Holmes Paradigm

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Abstract:
Scientists, epidemiologists and medical researchers, who in their past studies on Coronavirus focused on the detection of its origin and on tracing back the trail of contagion, often compared their activity to Sherlock Holmes's investigations. In particular, references to Sherlock Holmes occurred in some Chinese medical reports, which alluded to this well-known literary and cultural icon to suggest the international relevance of the battle against COVID-19. In this respect, Arthur Conan Doyle's 'The Adventure of the Dying Detective' (1913), a short story in which Holmes is (seemingly) infected by a deadly tropical disease, may be seen as an expression of what I call 'the Sherlock Holmes Paradigm'. This paradigm identifies the investigator's fight against disease and infection coming from outside the margins of the British empire; at the same time, the detective's investigations lead to the awareness that these infections are not necessarily caused by an 'external' source but originate within the boundaries of the British Empire. 'The Sherlock Holmes Paradigm' has also been adopted and updated in a series of neo-Victorian texts that directly or indirectly borrow elements from Holmes's adventures: from David Stuart Davies's *Sherlock Holmes: The Shadow of the Rat* (2010) to Tom Holland's *Supping with Panthers* (1996) and George Mann's *The Affinity Bridge* (2008); in these novels, Sherlock Holmes and Holmesian investigators have to face diseases contaminating London, proving that the scientific methods used by Doyle's detective are an extremely useful approach in both medical and literary discourse, in particular as regards the complex relationship between the ideas of 'centre' and 'margins'.

Keywords: *The Affinity Bridge*, Coronavirus, David Stuart Davies, disease, Arthur Conan Doyle, Tom Holland, Sherlock Holmes, *Sherlock Holmes: The Shadow of the Rat*, George Mann, *Supping with Panthers*.

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The history of medicine and medical research is a narrative based on clinical investigations and detections. In this view, the majority of 'crimes' may be attributed to genetic issues, bacteria, and viruses, and the number of victims may range from a few individuals to millions of people, as in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic. The teams of scientists collecting information

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and data in their case studies have repeatedly been compared to the detectives of the past, with the sole difference being that their computers, technological devices, and modern laboratories have replaced fingerprints, magnifying glasses, and gas-lit Victorian hospitals. Doyle's Sherlock Holmes is one of the first figures to spring to mind when introducing a parallel between detective work and the activity of contemporary medical researchers. For Jorgen Nordenstrom, Evidence-based Medicine (EBM), defined as the integration of research evidence (founded upon experimentation, observation and experience) with clinical expertise and patient values, "has similarities to detective work", since in both cases "the initial stage consists in being confronted with a 'case' in which certain events have preceded the current situation" (Nordenstrom 2007: x), with illnesses and diseases replacing crimes, and patients substituting for the victims. Moreover, the foundation of Sherlock Holmes's strategy, outlined in the first chapter of *The Sign of Four* (1890), entitled 'The Science of Deduction' (Doyle 1996: 64), has been compared to "the diagnostic process employed in clinical medicine as well as [to] the process used when practicing EBM" (Nordenstrom 2007: 75).[1]

Further comparisons have been drawn between the Holmesian method of deduction (or logical backward reasoning) and medical research on infection and morbidity rates. In turn, Holmes's adventures are replete with references to medicine, illnesses, doctors, etc., to the point that it has been calculated that the sixty stories featuring the Baker Street detective mention 68 diseases, 32 medical terms, 22 drugs, 12 medical specialties, and nearly 40 doctors, along with medical journals and medical schools (Key and Rodin 1987: 22). Additionally, many of Doyle's characters (above all Sherlock Holmes himself) are inspired by real doctors and patients. As Doyle admitted in his autobiographical writings and in interviews, the major source of influence for the creation of the Baker Street detective was Dr. Joseph Bell, his professor of clinical surgery at Edinburgh University. Bell's ability to determine a patient's profession and even his or her malady from mere observation would have an enormous impact on Holmes's criminally oriented, diagnostic eye (see Snyder 2003: 104).

1. Holmesian Takes on the COVID-19 Pandemic

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that scientists, epidemiologists and medical researchers in their studies on SARS-CoV-2 attempted, in the detection of its origin, to trace back the trail of contagion by using Sherlock Holmes as a

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model. In an article entitled 'Fighting COVID-19: Everyone Needs to Be Their Own Sherlock Holmes', after comparing the fight against Coronavirus to the surveillance of an enemy spy and listing the countries that adopted the best measures to limit its spread, Dominic Meagher mentioned "the lesson from Wuhan" in China (Meagher 2020: n.p.), the city in which the COVID-19 pandemic is assumed to have originated. In Meagher's words, "[d]octors there talk about an army of Sherlock Holmeses, hunting for clues about where the virus has been. Only when we know everywhere this virus has been can the disease be controlled" (Meagher 2020: n.p.).

In this respect, it is indicative that some of the reports related to the study of COVID-19, written in Sherlock Holmes's shadow, were published in China and refer to Chinese clinical detectives. An anonymous online article published in *ChinaDaily.com* on 7 July 2020 opened with the depiction of a Chinese epidemiological investigator working in the Fengtai District Center for Disease Control and Prevention: "Li Ruoxi, who barely finished putting on his protective gear, was soaked in sweat due to Beijing's summer heat wave" (Anon. 2020: n.p.). According to this article, when an epidemic occurs, scientists such as Li Ruoxi "trace the activities of confirmed cases in the shortest amount of time, analyze the infection route and transmission chain and take timely measures to stop the spread of the virus" (Anon. 2020: n.p.). Then Li Ruoxi himself is cited, asserting that "We are the 'Sherlock Holmes' tracing the virus" (Anon. 2020: n.p.). In another article, entitled 'Tianjin's "Sherlock Holmes" goes on COVID-19 Trail', readers are introduced to Zhang Ying, Deputy Director at the Tianjin Center for Disease Control and Prevention, who has been hailed as the "female Sherlock Holmes" for her ability to trace and map the places Coronavirus patients have frequented (Yang 2020: n. p.). Zhang Ying's attitude reminded "people of the way the fictional Baker Street detective – immortalized by Conan Doyle – unraveled crime mysteries" (Yang 2020: n.p.). Although this is only a limited sample of Chinese journalistic articles dealing with COVID-19, the discussed attitudes and scientific methods were perfectly in line with what Sherlock Holmes firmly asserts in *A Scandal in Bohemia* (1891), when he replies to Watson that "[it] is a capital mistake to theorise before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist fact to suit theories instead of theories to suit facts" (Doyle 1996: 119). The human factor cannot be discounted in scientific discourse, as the example of Holmes's presence in Chinese reports on Coronavirus proves. Therefore, even the most detached scientific reasoning and research are still

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human products, and hence subject to and influenced by historical, cultural and political contingencies, not least because words such as 'infection' and 'contagion' are culture-laden terms.

In his analysis of the relationship between contagion and culture, Martin S. Pernick argues that the concept of contagion "was shaped by culture" and that any statement about the causes and origins of diseases "implicitly involves determining what is responsible" (Perkick 2002: 861-862) – and, sometimes, also who. Nevertheless, apart from the comparison between Chinese researchers and Sherlock Holmes, which suggested the global relevance of the battle against COVID-19 (a battle that is not to be intended as an exclusively Chinese 'issue'), the relationship between China and Doyle's most famous literary creation was hardly new. Therefore, if on the one hand, Holmes is an international 'signifier' adopted by Chinese mass-media and institutions to convey their strategic attitude to Coronavirus, on the other hand, Doyle's detective has always been a recurring presence in Chinese culture.

The great success enjoyed by Sherlock Holmes in China dates back to 1896 during the Qing Dynasty (when four licensed translations of Sherlock Holmes episodes appeared in the newspaper *Current Affairs*). These publications were followed in the 1920s by the Huo Sang narrative cycle produced by Cheng Xiaoqing (the novelist who created the so-called 'Shanghai Sherlock Holmes'). A famous screen version followed in 1931, with the detective's popularity even surviving the Maoist Cultural Revolution, with the twenty-first century seeing a veritable explosion of the *Sherlock* (2010-2017) TV series phenomenon – with more than fifteen million viewers watching the adventures of 'Curly Fu' and 'Peanut', as Holmes (Benedict Cumberbatch) and Watson (Martin Freeman) have been nicknamed in China (see McCaw 2019: 208-211; Yan 2017: n.p.). Besides these printed and televised representations of Sherlock Holmes, the allusions in recent Chinese articles related to the COVID pandemic may be due to the global resonance of this literary figure. Since China was reputed to be the nation in which the Coronavirus made its first appearance, Chinese medical researchers and clinical investigators attempting to trace the origin of the contagion and to find a cure seemed to prefer to resort to the universally respected and fascinating literary creation of Sherlock Holmes as a common transcultural reference point – but also as a strategy of deflection, implicitly positioning themselves as defenders of global health on the right side of history rather

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than assuming the part of possible culprits. Part of the misinformation and conspiracy theories on the pandemic (defined by the World Health Organisation as the 'infodemic'), of course, centred on more or less documented accusations levelled against China – ranging from a supposed link between the Wuhan Institute of Virology and an accidental leakage of a (lab-manufactured) virus to the deliberate spread of the infection in order to destabilise the American and worldwide economies. In some journalistic reports written in English (and therefore presumably addressed to an international or at least Anglophone readership), Chinese epidemiological detectives responded to these accusations by using Holmes as a means both to defend themselves against such insinuations and to show the worldwide relevance of this infection. This is just one example of what I term 'the Sherlock Holmes Paradigm',[2] which characterises, sometimes ambivalently, the investigator's fight against contamination, disease, and infection coming from outside the boundaries of the British Empire. Introduced by Doyle himself in many of Holmes's stories, and in particular in 'The Adventure of the Dying Detective' (1913), the Sherlock Holmes Paradigm also tends to lead the detective's investigations to the awareness that infections are not necessarily caused by an 'external' source, but – on the contrary – often originate in the centre of the British Empire, namely in London.

This same paradigm has also been adopted and updated in a series of neo-Victorian texts, from David Stuart Davies's pseudo-Holmesian *Sherlock Holmes: The Shadow of the Rat* (2010) and Tom Holland's *Supping with Panthers* (1996) to George Mann's steampunk fantasy *The Affinity Bridge* (2008). In all these texts, Sherlock Holmes and Holmesian investigators have to battle diseases contaminating London, the centre of Victorian economic and colonial hegemony, proving that the scientific methods adopted by Doyle's detective provide an extremely useful approach to medical, cultural and literary discourse, then as now, and demonstrating that terms such as 'infection' inevitably break geographic boundaries, based as society is on the constant exchange of people and goods. Following this lead, Lorenzo Servitje and Kari Nixon contend that the idea of contagion is "endemic" to our contemporary culture in ways that are not too different from what they were in the past. This is particularly evident in the nineteenth century, despite its obvious medical and scientific advances to earlier periods. Indeed, people "perceive that they have moved beyond contagious diseases", such as cholera or smallpox, though they remain "threatened by 'foreign' and

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'emerging' diseases" (Servitjie and Nixon 2016: 1). Consequently, contagion – conceived both as a disease and a metaphor – "continues to influence how we perceive and construct our world" (Servitjie and Nixon 2016: 4).

2. Sherlock Holmes and Fears of Colonial Contagion

During the Victorian era, the terms 'contagion' and 'infection' referred to two very different concepts, although they shared a common idea. Whereas the former alluded to person-to-person contact and the latter to a disease spread by environmental factors (according to the so-called miasma theory), the source of the malady in both cases was often located beyond the margins of the 'civilisation' proper – from the farthest outposts of the British Empire to the most squalid areas of metropolitan cities.[3] The underlying cause was therefore a question of unsavoury connection between cultural, economic and social realities that should have been but could not be kept apart due to new marketing routes and the increasingly capitalistic modes of production. For this reason, "Victorian theories and policies toward contagion were concerned with a broader problem of communication across boundaries", in Chung-jen Chen's words (Chen 2019: 2). Since the Latin etymology of the term contagion (from *con*, with, together, and *tangere*, to touch) suggests coexisting feelings of attraction and repulsion towards what is different or unknown, "the fear of or a fascination with the stranger" proves central "to narratives of contagion" (Chen 2019: 4). These ideas related to contagion granted Victorian people, doctors, writers, and policy-makers – in their different capacities – a specific epistemological framework with which it was possible to detect, isolate, classify (and eventually defeat) all forms of dangerous intrusion. At the same time, the inherent fascination for (and the necessity of) contact with the 'Other' gave the Victorians the opportunity to gain a better understanding of their own identity as British individuals and citizens. For instance, Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853) depicts, emblematically, the confrontation with the social 'Other' in terms of the impact of malady and of the muddy, foggy and unhealthy miasma surrounding London (and its juridical institutions). The conveyance of Jo's smallpox to Esther Summerson transforms into a "narrative vehicle for a panoramic diagnosis of relationships between city and country, adults and children, the rich and the poor" (Burgan 2002: 837). In contrast, Doyle's focus on the paradoxes and ambiguities of contamination coming from the colonies offers a more nuanced depiction of the issue of infection, in which

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the opposition between (colonial) margins and (British) centre are called into question.

Doyle's involvement with the Anglo-Boer War is relevant to an understanding of the genesis of many of his detective stories, and their subsequent neo-Victorian appropriations. Already famous as Sherlock Holmes's creator, Doyle joined the staff of the Langman Hospital, a private field hospital in Bloemfontein, South Africa, during the explosion of the typhoid fever epidemic (with 500 cases of infection, and more than 100 deaths) in the first months of 1900. His intuition was that the British Army had mistakenly not made anti-typhoid vaccination compulsory for soldiers because of its side effects. Despite failing to convince two Royal Commissions of the necessity of prophylactic vaccination, he was knighted because of his medical endeavours during the war. Accordingly, Doyle's personal experiences (and implicitly failures) seem to inform his literary productions, and particularly those featuring the quintessential detective Sherlock Holmes, interested in retracing and fighting criminal, moral and cultural infections, or in preventing them from occurring.

In desiring to make the invisible visible and to discover the sources of crimes through detailed observation and study of (criminal) traces of (moral) infection, Doyle's detective follows the trails of nineteenth-century international scientists such as Robert Koch, Santiago Ramón y Cajal, and Louis Pasteur. At the same time, Holmes's method of deduction has directly or indirectly influenced successive scientists, including those facing the COVID-19 pandemic first in China, and then worldwide. At the beginning of the short story 'A Case of Identity' (1891), for instance, Sherlock imagines watching London from above in a quasi-panoptic desire to access all the secrets concealed behind house walls, in much the same way as scientists have searched for bacteria and viruses with their microscopes:

> We would not dare to conceive the things which are really mere commonplaces of existence. If we could fly out of that window hand in hand, hover over this great city, gently remove the roofs, and peep in at the queer things which are going on, the strange coincidences, the plannings, the cross-purposes, the wonderful chains of events, working through generations, and leading to the most outré results, it would

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> make all fiction with its conventionalities and foreseen conclusions most stale and unprofitable. (Doyle 1996: 147)

Aptly, the first encounter between John Watson, accompanied by his friend Dr. Stamford, and Sherlock Holmes in *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) takes place in the latter's laboratory, as the detective studies blood corpuscles:

> This was a lofty chamber, lined and littered with countless bottles. Broad, low tables were scattered about, which bristled with retorts, test-tubes, and little Bunsen lamps, with their blue flickering flames. There was only one student in the room, who was bending over a distant table absorbed in his work. At the sound of our steps he glanced round and sprang to his feet with a cry of pleasure […]. Had he discovered a gold mine, greater delight could not have shone upon his features. (Doyle 1996: 13)

Doyle's decision to introduce Holmes as busily working on blood tests in the quest for profitable discoveries highlights the importance of medical knowledge in the detective's approach to crimes. Many critics have read this as an anticipation of forensic science (see Thomas 1999; O'Brien 2003) and of the view of blood as a marker of biological, social, and national identity. For it is a healthy national integrity associated with blood that the detective seeks to defend, blood entailing further metaphorical resonances concerning the circulation of people, goods, and crimes in the (human as well as national) body.

At the end of the nineteenth-century, when Britain was facing problems in managing a huge worldwide Empire, the creation of rational and scientific detectives such as Holmes seemed to reassure readers (and citizens) of the possible control and containment of contagious invasions from abroad and to halting of the threat's circulation. Doyle thus "draws on the discourse of medicine precisely because it allows him to represent the disturbances Holmes investigates as 'alien contagions' introduced into British society through its contact with other cultures", as Susan Canon Harris points out, adding that "[this] function of the contagion metaphor becomes [even] more apparent when Holmes investigates cases involving poisons" (Harris 2003: 449).

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One of the most famous passages in *A Study in Scarlet* depicts London as the focus of attraction for all sorts of criminal acts. In this labyrinthine metropolis, Doctor John Watson – formerly a colonial soldier fighting, and wounded, in Afghanistan – is in search of a stable identity as an individual "with neither kith nor kin in England" (Doyle 1996: 11). As he confesses, "[under] such circumstances I naturally gravitated to London, that great cesspool into which all the loungers and idlers of the Empire are irresistibly drained" (Doyle 1996: 11). This image, which conflates fears of pollution and contamination coming from the peripheries in a centripetal movement towards the centre, is fundamental to understanding the modalities through which Homes and Watson deal with crimes located (or related to) the colonies. London becomes a "contact zone" (Pratt 1992: 1), in Mary Louise Pratt's definition, generated by the colonial encounter. The city is turned into a contested imperial space in which the relationship between coloniser and colonised, however, is not explored "in terms of separateness" but, rather, "in terms of copresence, interaction, interlocking understanding and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power" (Pratt 1992: 7). And it is this "copresence" that informs the 'Sherlock Holmes Paradigm', according to which on the one hand, the contaminating menace is seemingly imported from the colonies, and on the other, its real source (or the people who profit from it) are firmly located in the centre of the British Empire.

Following the success of *A Study in Scarlet*, *The Sign of Four* (1890) proves that faraway tragic events such as the Indian Mutiny of 1857 (or the First Indian War of Independence, as it has been more recently and more opportunely defined), have a direct resonance on the vicissitudes of people living in London. This narrative features dangerous intruders metaphorically (and literally) poisoning the heart of Empire, in this case with deadly darts. Alongside *The Sign of Four*, Doyle's oeuvre is replete with references to infections and diseases coming from the colonies: from 'The Adventure of the Yellow Face' (1893), which dramatises a case of interracial contamination, to 'The Adventure of the Devil's Foot' (1910), in which a deadly curse is identified with a poison known to medical men in Africa. 'The Adventure of the Creeping Man' (1923) features a serum extracted from a Himalayan monkey that reduces a respectable Professor into a creeping degenerate, while in 'The Adventure of the Blanched Soldier' (1926), Godfrey Emsworth, a former soldier fighting in South Africa during the Second Boer War, seems to be the victim of leprosy, which he contracted in

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a field hospital. The text depicts the presumably infected British soldier as a disquieting 'alien' creature – as described by his friend James Dodd, who contacts Holmes because he is worried about Emsworth's disappearance:

> There was something shocking about the man, Mr. Holmes. It wasn't merely that ghastly face glimmering as white as cheese in the darkness. It was more subtle than that – something slinking, something furtive, something guilty – something very unlike the frank, manly lad that I had known. It left a feeling of horror in my mind. (Doyle 1993: 37)

Yet what initially appears as the outcome of an alien contagion turns out to be something far more mundane and ordinary. After having consulted a famous London dermatologist, Holmes reassures the soldier's friend and Emsworth's family that the man simply suffers from a form of ichthyosis, exposing the presumed colonial contamination as unreal.

In other Holmes stories, however, respectable British citizens exploit colonial infection for criminal reasons. In 'The Adventure of the Dying Detective' (1913), one of the most emblematic examples of a Holmesian contagion narrative, and of the 'Sherlock Holmes Paradigm', Holmes is apparently dying from a disease originating in the Eastern colonies, which he probably caught from Chinese sailors in the East End during one of his recent investigations. In watching and describing the dying detective, Watson resorts to many of the Victorian stereotypes associated not only with malady but also with contagious Otherness and alterity:

> He was indeed a deplorable spectacle. In the dim light of a foggy November day the sick room was a gloomy spot, but it was that gaunt, wasted face staring at me from the bed which sent a chill to my heart. His eyes had the brightness of fever, there was a hectic flush upon either cheek, and dark crusts clung to his lips; the thin hands upon the coverlet twitched incessantly, his voice was croaking and spasmodic. He lay listlessly as I entered the room, but the sight of me brought a gleam of recognition to his eyes. (Doyle 1993: 338)

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Refusing to be treated either by Watson or by experts on tropical diseases, Holmes instead sends Watson to look for Culverton Smith, who is not a medical man – he owns a plantation in Sumatra though temporarily residing in London – but possesses precious information on what Holmes calls "the Tapanuli Fever", also known as the "black Formosa corruption" (Doyle 1993: 339).[4] Indeed, an outbreak of this disease upon his plantation has led Culverton Smith to study it himself and become a sort of expert in the field.

When Watson visits Culverton Smith's residence in Lower Burke Street (between Notting Hill and Kensington), he encounters a man with "a great yellow face, coarse-grained and greasy", whose freakish body is "small and frail, twisted in the shoulders and back like one who has suffered from rickets in his childhood" (Doyle 1993: 345). Culverton Smith is one of Doyle's most intriguing villains, who introduces himself and his 'skills' in the following terms:

> I only know Mr. Holmes through some business dealings which we have had, but I have every respect for his talents and his character. He is an amateur of crime, as I am of disease. For him the villain, for me the microbe. There are my prisons […]. Among those gelatine cultivations some of the very worst offenders in the world are now doing time. (Doyle 1993: 347)

Culverton Smith would become a source of inspiration for the villains of many contagion narratives of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The characterisation and intentions of this "amateur […] of disease" also impact neo-Victorian Holmesian or para-Holmesian narrations, which feature British characters that represent major threats to national and international health.

At the end of 'The Adventure of the Dying Detective', readers discover that Holmes feigned his illness in order to disclose Culverton Smith's deadly plan: to poison the detective after having killed his nephew Victor with a deadly disease. Culverton Smith had sent the detective an ivory box with a sliding lid containing a poisoned metal spring, because he feared that Holmes was on the point of exposing him. The fact that Culverton Smith sends his poisoned box by post could be seen to anticipate the real terrorist 'Anthrax attacks' which took place in the United States in September 2001, during which envelopes contaminated with anthrax spores were sent to news media offices and to some Democratic senators, killing five people and

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infecting nearly twenty individuals. In Doyle's short story, Holmes succeeds in extorting a confession from Culverton Smith – because Holmes's symptoms have convinced the villain that the detective is about to die – and then to have him arrested. This is just one of the many examples in which Doyle's stories "abound with threats to [the] national body" (Otis 1999: 100), in this case coming from the Eastern colonies. According to Laura Otis, "[when] foreign germs and poisons are manipulated by vengeful malefactors […], the biological dangers are not a metaphor for political threats; they *are* political threats" (Otis 1999: 100). Like the accusations alleged against the Chinese government for having partially concealed Coronavirus (or, worse, created it through genetic engineering), biological dangers turn into "political threats" that represent a menace not only for worldwide health but also for the worldwide economy. The contact with other cultures, now as then, underlies real and fictional narratives of detected contagions, although – as the recent pandemic showed – things are more nuanced. The protagonists (both Victorian investigators and contemporary medical researchers) have to deal with complex issues and questions arising from the awareness that the circulation of people and economic exchange is unavoidable in both the globalised colonial and postcolonial worlds.

Due to his inclination to bouts of melancholy, idleness, and drug addiction, Holmes is far from being a perfect embodiment of British colonial power. Furthermore, although the sources of crime in the Holmesian canon are located outside the margins of Empire, those who profit from them are (apparently) respectable British citizens, as the abovementioned examples from Doyle's texts demonstrate. Therefore an inherent paradox lies at the heart of 'the Sherlock Holmes Paradigm' which many critics have highlighted, and which many neo-Victorian reconfigurations of the Holmesian canon have repurposed. This paradox centres on a contradiction between the image of Victorian 'Great' Britain as a morally, politically and physically healthy national body and its susceptibility to debilitating disease. At the basis of this "gap" resides a "complicated and anxious relationship […] between the British imperial state and its English national core", as Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee notes (Mukherjee 2013: 78). Holmes's investigations and his own complex personality testify to the anxieties inherent in fears of contamination, since the "out-of-the-way Asiatic disease" (Doyle 1993: 348), as the deadly Eastern plague is described in 'The Adventure of the Dying Detective', is not just an infection generated by and

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from the colonies, but deliberately imported to Britain's shores by a member of the colonising class. Hence this threat cannot be dissociated and separated from the British Empire, of which Holmes too is a contradictory emblem.

3. Chasing Disease in Neo-Victorian Detective Stories

Neo-Victorian novels feature various narratives focused on the question of infection, adopted as a modality to reflect on contemporary cogent issues. The idea of dirt as a volatile notion related to contamination is central, for instance, in Clare Clark's *The Great Stink* (2005) and Matthew Kneale's *Sweet Thames* (2006). In his attempt to save London from the cholera infection by restructuring its sewers, the engineer Joshua Jeavons in *Sweet Thames* discovers the presence of unspeakable secrets lurking behind the supposed stability of Victorian families, while in *The Great Stink* the former Crimean soldier William May must plunge into the filthiest recesses of the city to save himself from an unjust accusation of murder. Hence these two novels "deconstruct traditional notions of bodily and moral purity (and impurity), implicitly interrogating persistent associations between dirt and poverty, and filth and female sexuality, which persist to this day" (Tomaiuolo 2018: 29). In Sheri Holman's *The Dress Lodger* (2001), set in Sunderland, quarantined during the 1831 cholera epidemic, the young pottery worker and part-time prostitute Gustine meets the surgeon Henry Chiver, whose own respectability is compromised by implication in the Burke and Hare murders in Edinburgh, with the novel in part becoming a contemplation of medical ethics, then and now. Similarly, in Anne Roiphe's *An Imperfect Lens* (2006), set in Alexandria during the 1880s and centred on a team of French scientists searching for the source of cholera raging in the Egyptian city, the nineteenth-century historical background becomes an occasion to explore contemporary concerns related to contagion. In her analysis of *Sweet Thames*, *The Dress Lodger* and *An Imperfect Lens*, Joanna Shawn Brigid O'Leary aptly notes that "these novels' representation of epidemics, like their reconfiguration of the germ, suggest twentieth- and twenty-first-century anxieties stemming from the threat of bioterrorism as well as from global pandemics of 'new illnesses'" (O'Leary 2013: 76). But it is neo-Victorian epidemic narratives featuring Sherlock Holmes, or detectives evidently inspired by him, that most explicitly dramatise questions related to the presence of infections (presumably) coming or stemming from a distinctively alien source.

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The fictional investigators of David Stuart Davies's *Sherlock Holmes: The Shadow of the Rat*, Tom Holland's *Supping with Panthers*, and George Mann's *The Affinity Bridge* all come into direct or indirect contact with the colonies and threats of contagion seemingly stemming therefrom. These encounters precipitate the investigators' disturbing realisation that their world does not have a definite secure centre (usually London) juxtaposed to a series of contaminating peripheries, and that viruses and diseases travel without regard for boundaries or geographical limits. The (once indisputable) borders separating the colonial criminal as the source of infection from the healthy Londoner (or British citizen) as the British defender become increasingly blurred. Contemporary geopolitical issues thus manifest an awareness that infections, in their capacity to cross borders, often undetected until too late, become an unavoidable part of our awareness of living in an interconnected world. Accordingly, these neo-Victorian texts (like Doyle's Holmesian stories) definitively challenge the idea that contagion is foreign in origin, replicating and updating the 'Sherlock Holmes Paradigm'.

Through Holmes, Doyle has offered an almost nostalgic depiction of Victorianism at the end of the Victorian age, or even when Queen Victoria was already dead since some Holmesian short stories were only written and published during the 1910s and 1920s. In a way, the detective's adventures represent an *ante-litteram* neo-Victorian narration, because Holmes has become a universally recognised Victorian and, more generally, British myth. Like other literary and cultural myths such as Frankenstein or Dracula, this fictional character has turned into a 'glocal' phenomenon that has found fertile soil everywhere, becoming a constant presence in novels, short stories, graphic novels, films, videogames, cartoons, and in countless other textual transpositions. Indeed, such 'glocalisation' can be regarded as a form of cross-cultural contagion. A fundamental asset in the so-called British heritage, Holmes has been adapted to manifold cultural, geographic, and temporal contexts, notwithstanding the canonical late-nineteenth-century iconography associated with him (often indebted to Basil Rathbone's cinematic impersonation, to Jeremy Brett's TV rendering, and to Sidney Paget's famous illustrations), and his peculiar methods of scientific investigation. Given that Sherlock Holmes is, at the same time, British *and* non-British, Janine H. Allan and Christopher Pittard assert that this literary figure "exceeds the totalising grasp of any single adaptation or representation, including Doyle's own" because, despite the recognisable narrative structure

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of the stories, they have become "generative rather than restrictive", with writers reimagining the great detective readily using the standard elements of Holmesian texts "and alter[ing] the details to make new narratives" (Allan and Pittard 2019: 2).

This is one of the main reasons that many neo-Victorian writers have appropriated the Baker Street detective and created new (and sometimes provocative) narrations derived either from this iconic figure or inspired by him. The countless examples include (more or less officially authorised) novels featuring Sherlock Holmes, from Jamyang Norbu's *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes* (1999) to Laurie King's *The Beekeeper's Apprentice* (1994), from Caleb Carr's *The Italian Secretary* (2005), commissioned by the American representatives of the Doyle Estate, to Michael Chabon's *The Final Solution* (2004) and Mitch Cullin's *A Slight Trick of the Mind* (2005). Anthony Horowitz's *The House of Silk* (2011), a Holmesian pastiche officially recognised by the Doyle Estate, provides another important example of what Catherine Wynne has called "neo-Holmesian fictions" (Wynne 2019: 213). The title of Horowitz's novel refers to a club operated by a clergyman who sells the boys living in his orphanage as prostitutes to well-to-do clients; however, due to the involvement of a Royal family member, the case never goes to trial. Replicating the typical Holmesian *topos* of the detective moving among English country houses, London's degraded quarters, and his residence at 221/B Baker Street, *The House of Silk* "is both Victorian and, with its focus on paedophilia – a crime which is very much a preoccupation of the twenty-first century – neo-Victorian" (Wynne 2013: 11).

4. Verminous Infection in *The Shadow of the Rat*

Davies's *The Shadow of the Rat* is a typically Doylean narrative set in London in 1895, which includes many characters familiar to readers, such as Inspector Lestrade, Mycroft Holmes, and even Dr. Stamford, Watson's friend who introduced him to Holmes in *A Study in Scarlet*. The title (and indeed the whole narrative) is inspired by a casual remark by Holmes, who mentions "the giant rat of Sumatra" and the vessel *Matilda Briggs* in the short story 'The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire' (1924).[5] *The Shadow of the Rat* opens with Holmes and Watson casually meeting Dr. Stamford, finding the latter drunk with mysterious marks on his arms. On the following day, Inspector Lestrade shows them a body found in the Thames with signs of the bubonic plague:

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> That the body was human and of the male gender was reasonably clear, but the features and the flesh were covered in the most obscene excrescence and pustules, which had erupted with a foul green excrescence. These were so disfiguring that many of the human features were hidden or obliterated. The remaining skin was marked at irregular intervals with purple blotches. The stench emanating from the open sores was almost overpowering. (Davies 2010: 12)

This gruesome image of a contaminated body anticipates the central theme of the narration (and, metaphorically, of many stories originally penned by Doyle): the fear of bodily and moral infection carried from afar. As much is suggested by Watson himself (a few pages later) on the riverbank, when he notes:

> I was conscious of the great laden-grey Thames floating by us, carrying a varied array of large and small craft upon its seething swell, some setting forth for foreign climes, some bringing with them strange cargoes to be unloaded at our docks. Maybe not only strange but deadly also. I shuddered at the thought. (Davies 2010: 14-15)

His reflection on the "strange" and "deadly" cargoes imported from distant colonies, as well as the potentially dangerous nature of London's maritime trade, foregrounds all the paradoxes of the circulation of goods defining capitalist markets – and in more recent times enabling the rapid spread of COVID-19 across the globe. Yet 'rats', of course, so closely associated with the spread of the plague, also carry connotations of conniving betrayal and moral corruption, degenerate qualities that, attached to 'vermin' as pests to be eradicated, slide uneasily into racist slurs and animalistic denigration of non-Western Others.

In the course of their investigations, Holmes and Watson visit 'The Bridge of Dreams' club, managed by the African American Josiah Barton, where ratting – the fight between rats and dogs – is a major attraction; here they notice a gigantic species of rat, presumably imported from Sumatra. Later on, during his search for Holmes, who has mysteriously disappeared,

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Watson finds the "Giant Rat" of Sumatra aboard the cargo vessel *Matilda Briggs*:

> What was contained within the cage made me drop my revolver in shock. There, blinking at the light, with hatred in its bulbous eyes, was the largest brown rat I had ever seen. The creature was the size of a large dog and was covered in rust-coloured, shaggy fur. It sat on its haunches, its front paws hanging, immobile like talons, before its great chest. Dark whiskers quivered at the end of its cruel snout. It was a living exhibit from Dante's *Inferno*! (Davies 2010: 53)

The image of this gigantic rat, an embodiment of anthropomorphised evil and cruelty, is another allusion to the dangerous nature of aliens coming from the farthest outposts of the Empire. At the same time, it reminds readers of science-fiction and horror novels and movies depicting genetically modified creatures, anticipating contested claims a decade after the novel's publication that "a live animal market in Wuhan, China" was the "ground zero for the [COVID-19] pandemic" or that the virus "leaked from a nearby laboratory" (Woolhouse 2024: n.p.), which would presumably have conducted animal experiments.

With the help of the famous hypnotist Salvini, Watson is finally reunited with Holmes – who fell under the mental control of the Hungarian Baroness Emmuska Dubeyk – and they both succeed in overcoming a plot to blackmail the British government. Pertinently, Baroness Dubeyk's plan involves spreading the bubonic plague all over London by breeding giant rats as the carriers of the deadly bacillus. By using contamination as a major constituent in its plot, *The Shadow of the Rat* becomes an example of the contemporary epidemic narrative, retrospectively projected onto a late-Victorian context. Moreover, Holmes here turns into an inadvertent ally of the Baroness after being hypnotised by her, apparently rendered more vulnerable to manipulation by constantly falling prey to melancholy and to his drug addiction, of which readers are repeatedly reminded. The novel portrays the Baroness as the typical exotic and seductive villainess coming from a non-British (albeit here European rather than Asian) country of much late-Victorian literature. A hypnotist and manipulator, Dubeyk has accumulated enormous wealth thanks to various commercial enterprises; just

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as importantly, she "studied medicine to a very high level and, following in the footsteps of Mendel, studied hereditary characteristics in animals" (Davies 2010: 82). The Baroness also performs genetic experiments with the help and support of the English doctor Simeon Karswell, proving that – in line with 'the (Neo)Victorian Sherlock Holmes Paradigm' – the contaminating intrusion of 'outsiders' (identified here by mutant rats from Sumatra and by a Hungarian Baroness) is facilitated by representatives of British medical institutions. Arguably, then, Davies's novel addresses contemporary concerns related to imported bioterrorism and genetic engineering – rewriting and re-reading the Holmesian canon through a neo-Victorian lens. In doing so, it also replicates the paradoxes of much late-nineteenth-century imperial fiction, in which, as Yumma Siddiqi argues, "European bodies are often represented in a double way. On the one hand, the body of the male adventurer can be indomitable", while on the other hand, "imperial fiction is […] replete with bodies that are unstable and fragile" (Siddiqi 2006: 241). In this respect, contamination narratives seem intent on underlining the radical precariousness of existence, which the British Empire works hard to repress. That the defenders of the health of the nation – both doctors and detectives – should prove susceptible to contamination, even to the point of becoming agents of contagion themselves, undermines the externality of the corruption, instead affording it a dual source as much within as outside Britain.

5. Blood Contamination in *Supping with Panthers*

Although Tom Holland's *Supping with Panthers* features neither Holmes nor Watson, many of the elements typical of Doyle's canon are included in the narrative, alongside the presence of other nineteenth-century historical figures such as Oscar Wilde, John William Polidori, Bram Stoker (a theatre manager and not yet a renowned novelist, who helps the protagonist in his investigations), the actor Henry Irving (a great friend of Stoker), and George Gordon, Lord Byron, eventually revealed to be a vampire. *Supping with Panthers* is a pastiche indebted to the tradition of the penny dreadful. One of the characters is named Lord Arthur Ruthven, after the vampire in John William Polidori's 'The Vampyre' (1819); although published in *The New Monthly Magazine*, Polidori's narrative pre-empted the sensational Gothic tropes of the cheaper penny bloods first published in the 1830s. Furthermore, Holland's novel includes zombie-like revenants and Jack the Ripper, whom,

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at the end of the narrative, we discover to be none other than the narrator of the whole story: the respectable doctor turned detective Dr John Eliot.

Supping with Panthers (published in the USA as *Slave of My Thirst*) opens with John or 'Jack' Eliot investigating a highly infectious sickness that turns humans into mindless revenants in the fictional province of Kalikshutra, not far from the Himalayas. These places are depicted by the doctor in ambivalent terms, in which the fear of alien contagion and the allure of the exotic coexist side by side:

> I felt myself to be in a world which had no place for man, which had endured and would endure for all time – cold, beautiful, and terrible. I felt what an Englishman in India must so often feel – how far from home I was, how remote from everything I understood. (Holland 2000: 48)

When Eliot returns to his residence and laboratory in Whitechapel, he is still haunted by the horrors and the gruesome pagan rituals he witnessed in India, which soon start to take place in the metropolis as well. In London, he is contacted by Rosamund, Lady Mowberley, who asks him to investigate the mysterious disappearance of her husband. Like Holmes in *A Study in Scarlet*, Eliot studies human blood, in this case to offer a scientific explanation for the revenants' capacity to survive death. In this neo-Victorian epidemic narrative, the central role played by blood as a vehicle of contagion and infection may be read in light of the historical context during which Holland's text was conceived and published. Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben interpret *Supping with Panthers* as a novel influenced by the AIDS epidemic of the 1980-90s, because its "focus on infection […] can be seen to mimic the general panic about the hitherto unknown disease and its manner of transmission, as well as the fear that medical science would prove powerless to control it" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2012: 30, fn. 29). Notwithstanding their supernatural and horror elements, narratives of epidemics such as *Supping with Panthers* may be approached as litmus tests of the fears typical of certain historical phases. In the same way, medical reports that associated the Chinese researchers' search for the sources of COVID-19 and Sherlock Holmes's investigations corroborate the idea that the dangers of disease (as well as the necessity to find a cure) were "expressed in and through language" (Mitchell 2012: 6) and through literary tropes.

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Despite the absence of Holmes and Watson, *Supping with Panthers* pays literary and metaliterary tributes to Doyle's works. In a letter addressed to the Indian Professor Huree Jyoti Navalkar, Eliot uses expressions that could be easily attributed to the Baker Street detective: "You remember my method – I search out, I study, I deduce. I remain what I have always been, a rationalist" (Holland 2010: 94). Later, Eliot adds that he graduated from Edinburgh with Dr Joseph Bell, who taught him to associate deductions and scientific experience (see Holland 2010: 104), and that his brain, like Holmes's – defined in *The Sign of Four* as a "calculating machine" (Doyle 1996: 69) – "exists purely to think and calculate" (Holland 2010: 139). Elsewhere, Doyle's *The Sign of Four* is mentioned by a girl named Susette (a vampire), although Eliot confesses that he has not read it because he does not have "much time for stories" (Holland 2010: 277). If on the one hand, the seductive Lilah, an undead woman of mysterious origin associated with Eastern degeneration, is the actual source of infection, on the other hand, her pursuer "Jack" Eliot cannot resist her allure and, at the end of the novel, turns into one of the most iconic representatives of late-Victorian violent crime: Jack the Ripper.

Unlike the revenants' and Lilah's lust for blood, which is necessary for their survival and therefore a mere animalistic urge, Jack the Ripper's actions derive from Eliot's 'enjoyable' desire to kill. London provides the perfect setting for his murderous impulses, as much due to the metropolis's own inherent as imported corruption:

> I stood on Highgate Hill, breathing in the air. London, below me. A stench of excrement and blood. I ran towards it for miles, through the night. I never stopped. Not until the stench was unbearable and my revulsion as ripe and vivid to match. Tonight, I thought to myself, I would enjoy the pleasures of hate. (Holland 2010: 471)

Stephen Arata's notion of "reverse colonization" (Arata 1990: 623) is here epitomised by Eliot's transformation from a rational doctor into what is reputed to be the first serial killer in history, infected by the mysterious blood disease originating in India as a 'contact zone' of exposure. *Supping with Panthers* also introduces a political sub-plot which frames the whole narration, since Lilah has coerced the vampirised Lord Mowberley, a Member

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of Parliament whom she has turned into her slave, to support a proposal for the British annexation of the independent territories surrounding Kalikshutra (also claimed by Russia). Ironically, such British expansionism would thus expand the reach of infection in Asia, rather than just the British mainland. In line with 'the (Neo-)Victorian Sherlock Holmes Paradigm', Holland's narrative of contagion thus replicates but also complicates the association between a contaminating invasion from outside the geographic boundaries of empire and the notion that the core of moral and bodily corruption co-exists within British institutions.

6. Zombie Contagion in *The Affinity Bridge*

The Affinity Bridge is the first installment of the Newbury and Hobbes Series by George Mann, who has also written novels featuring Sherlock Holmes himself – *Sherlock Holmes: The Will of the Dead* (2013) and *Sherlock Holmes: The Spirit Box* (2014) – as well as audiobooks, graphic novels, novellas and stories that are part of the *Doctor Who* fictional universe. Sir Maurice Newbury, an anthropologist working at the British Museum, secretly employed as investigator for the British Crown, is confronted with two simultaneous mysteries: the explosion of the Lady Armitage airship (driven by an automaton) near Finsbury Park and a series of murders by a glowing policeman in Whitechapel. Like Sherlock Holmes, with whom he shares many traits, including his addiction to drugs, Newbury is assisted by Veronica Hobbes, an independent woman and a sort of female Watsonian sidekick, as well as by Sir Charles Bainbridge, Chief Inspector at New Scotland Yard, clearly inspired by Doyle's Lestrade. Newbury also attends 'The Orleans Club', which stands in for 'The Diogenes Club' in Sherlock Holmes's stories.

In this steampunk novel set in 1901 (the year of Queen Victoria's death and of England's symbolic entrance into modernity in the real world), Mann's London is a city witnessing rapid technological advances but also supernatural events, with Newbury and Hobbes having to face the assault of zombies or "walking cadavers" as they are called in the novel (Mann 2008: 28). *The Affinity Bridge* opens with a description of these creatures' attacks against British Soldiers in India, as if to anticipate the 'imported' infection that will strike the most squalid areas of London:

> The creature […] was like something raised from the very depths of Hades itself. It was dressed in torn rags of an Indian

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> peasant, and may have once been human, but now looked more like a half-rotten corpse than anything resembling a man. (Mann 2008: 12)

This reference to an alien contagion – with the zombie virus replacing Victorian diseases such as smallpox, plague, or syphilis – is reiterated by Newbury himself, when he comments that "the plague was brought here from India, borne over by a returning soldier" (Mann 2008: 26-27), though the carrier's own ethnicity is never specified.

In Mann's alternative steampunk Victorian past, Queen Victoria is artificially kept alive by strange machines; this element represents one of the most striking and significant innovations of *The Affinity Bridge*. In the scene that introduces this artificially sustained Victoria, the Queen is described as a sort of undead being similar to the creatures that are ravaging London streets, thus blurring the distinction between the idea of an alien contagion and the awareness that the domestic body of Britain itself as deadly ill and unnaturally 'Othered'. Moreover, since Victoria is now half-human and half-mechanical, this steampunk royal also resembles the automatons (later turned into assassins) created by the unscrupulous French mad scientist Dr Pierre Villers at Chapman and Villiers Air Transportation Services. Most of all, however, this depiction of a cyborg-like monarch implies that, despite the attempts at keeping the Queen (and her economic power) alive, the Victorian Empire integrity is already compromised and possibly doomed in the longer term:

> The Queen was lashed into her wheelchair, her legs bound together, her arms free and resting on the wooden handles that enabled her to rotate the wheels of the contraption. Two enormous tubes protruded from her chest, just underneath her breasts, folding around beneath her arms to connect to the large tanks of air that were mounted on the back of the chair […]. A drip fed a strange, pinkish liquid into her bloodstream via a catheter in her arm and a bar suspended on a brass frame over her head. (Mann 2008: 112)

Although she seldom speaks and is bound to a chair, in Marie-Luise Kohlke's words, the Queen is "the most memorable of Mann's cast of characters", and the fact that she ensures that the interests of the crown "take precedence over

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any ethical considerations" – readers eventually discover the British government's involvement in many of the crimes Newbury and Hobbes are investigating – calls to mind "the democratic shortfalls in our present-day societies" (Kohlke 2008/2009: 173), such as abuse of power or its unethical mercenary pursuit of capitalist hegemony regardless of the cost. As do other neo-Victorian texts, rather than paying a mere nostalgic homage to the nineteenth century, *The Affinity Bridge* redeploys references to the past as a lens to investigate the inconsistencies of the present.

Revenants feature prominently in *The Affinity Bridge* (and, as previously seen, in *Supping with Panthers*); one of the main reasons for their prominence is that zombies are a quintessentially postmodern myth. Since their first appearance in cinema, the living dead have represented a cultural barometer for the anxieties and fears of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For instance, the undead of George Romero's *The Night of the Living Dead* (1968), considered the first movie imbued zombie with specific recognisable traits as dumb, slow-paced and flesh-eating creatures, were a product of the fears of a collapsing society during the politically ebullient 1960s. In turn, the walking dead of the 1970s and 1980s served as metaphors for the dehumanised condition of consumers, as, for instance, in *The Dawn of the Dead* (1978), also directed by Romero in 1978, which is mainly set in a shopping mall. The recent success of zombie narratives has fostered the commercial rise of the undead from marginalised B-movie figures to the protagonists of videogames as in *Resident Evil* (1996) and *House of the Dead* (1997), comic books such as *The Walking Dead* (2005-2019), TV series such as *In the Flesh* (2013-2014) and *The Walking Dead* (2010]–), mash-up novels including Seth Grahame-Smith's *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009), and even fake reportages and manuals, as in the case of Max Brooks's *The Zombie Survival Guide* (2003) and *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War* (2006). Among other things, the revived impact of zombies can be also explained as a consequence of the global panic following the fear of worldwide pandemics and/or terrorist attacks. Like Ian Edginton and Davide Fabbri's graphic novel *Victorian Undead: Sherlock Holmes vs Zombies* (2010), set in an alternative 1898 and featuring a horde of mindless zombies guided by Sherlock Holmes's arch-enemy Professor Moriarty (himself a sentient zombie), novels such as *Supping with Panthers* and *The Affinity Bridge* fall within a specific narrative subgenre of popular literature. Priscilla Wald has defined this subgenre as "epidemiological horror" or "bio-horror"

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in which "the conventions of horror meet the dangers of contagion, as a devastating communicable disease that turns the infected into predatory monsters" (Wald 2012: 99). These narratives suggest that everyone can be contaminated, becoming a potential worldwide threat for a society in which the free circulation of goods and people functions as both a sign of progress and eventual danger.

7. Conclusion: From Sherlock to SHERLOCK

As the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated, truth may be stranger than fiction. In Mann's *The Affinity Bridge*, for instance, Newbury's worries about the possibility of finding a definite cure for the infection anticipate journalistic apprehensions about British isolationism:

> Her Majesty would be growing impatient with the crisis by now, keen for the virus to burn itself out in the poorer districts of the city. […] If no solution were found soon, he had no doubt that she would place a cordon round the slums in an effort to slow the spread of the disease. (Mann 2008: 72-73)

Real-world Britain, of course, had to endure a double form of isolation due to Brexit and the necessity of controlling the spread of the COVID-19 virus (like Mann's Indian zombie variant). Newbury's concerns also pre-figure the UK government's callous disregard of vulnerable populations, under then Prime Minister Boris Johnson, including its perceived betrayal of care home residents and members of the BAME community, especially healthcare workers, with apparent greater susceptibility to infection with lethal outcomes (see, e.g., BBC 2022: n.p.; BBC 2024: n.p.; Public Health England 2022).

Another example of the prescient strangeness of fiction (when compared to the strangeness of truth) is offered by one of the most famous epidemic narratives we have mentioned: Brooks's *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War*. Written as a journalistic collection of individual accounts edited by an unnamed agent of the United Nations Postwar Commission, *World War Z* documented that the first cases of infection were reported in China, specifically in the Chongqing region. Like *World War Z*, which opened after the war against the zombie pandemic has already been won, on the occasion of the "Victory in China Day" celebrations (Brooks 2013: 2), real-world scientists, researchers, and international institutions won

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their war against Coronavirus, and tried to face its medical, economical, and social (side)effects. Among these researchers, Hodan Abdullahi and Najoua Soudi focused on the long-term impact of the virus, stressing that

> [i]t doesn't take a system thinker to point out that the pandemic has impacted every aspect of people's lives, but it does take a system thinker to make sense of the underlying complexity of these connections, that too often go unnoticed, misrepresented, or unconsidered. (Abdullahi and Soudi 2020: n.p.)

To face the pandemic, Abdullahi and Soudi proposed "system thinking" as a useful modality, arguing that Sherlock Holmes's way of "deliberately seeing with new eyes" would inspire people, scientists, and policy makers "to think divergently and convergently at the right time in the right place – teaching us to see our old and persisting issues with new eyes" (Abdullahi and Soudi 2020: n.p.). The sentence deliberately echoed Holmes's famous assertion in *A Scandal in Bohemia:* "You see, but you do not observe. The distinction is clear" (Doyle 1996: 118). Doyle's detective continues and will continue to represent a symbolic reference point for all scientists facing future phenomena like the COVID-19 pandemic, a contagion that confirmed the absence of distinctions between the (epidemic) centre and its margins, and that all humankind was globally – and virally – interconnected. More recently, anxieties about the possible spread of mpox – formerly 'monkey pox', but renamed to remove racist connotations – from the African continent to Europe (and Asia) has reiterated that same interconnectedness (see, e.g., Lawal 2024: n.p.). Accordingly, both the 2022 mpox outbreak (that also spread to North America) and the 2024 outbreak of a new, more virulent strain, were both declared global public health emergencies by the World Health Organisation (Davies 2024: n.p.).

In 2019, before the spread of the COVID-19 virus, a team of researchers published an article dealing with the importance of rapid detection of nucleic acids in clinical diagnostics and biotechnology, which included a direct reference to Doyle's detective. The team established a diagnostic platform based on 'Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats' or CRISPR (a group of DNA segments) for specific recognition of desired DNA or RNA sequences. The name given to this platform was

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'Specific High-sensitivity Enzymatic Reporter Unlocking', for short SHERLOCK. The importance of this platform, whose acronym was evidently inspired by the name of the Baker Street detective, consisted in allowing multiplexed, portable, and ultra-sensitive detection of RNA or DNA from clinically relevant samples. After the explosion of the pandemic, SHERLOCK proved extremely helpful in detecting SARS-CoV-2, and – integrated with other and more rapid testing platforms – it allowed research laboratories to identify Coronavirus-positive samples in 15 to 45 minutes (Kellner, Koob, Gootenberg et al. 2019: 2987).[6]

The rapidity with which this virus spread, confirmed that it was possible to apply 'the Sherlock Holmes Paradigm' not only to narrative works but to scientific practices as well. Whereas the source of the COVID-19 outbreak was located in China, the contagion's effects and virus's impacts were mainly due to our society and our way of living, based on rapid forms of communication and circulation of people and goods. As the experience of COVID-19 has taught us, the more contacts are necessary and important (for personal, educational, political, institutional, and economic reasons), the more they can be potentially infective – as embodied in the now widespread colloquial term of something 'going viral' (usually a news story, social media post, or meme). Coronavirus demonstrated that, in the twenty-first century, physical contact is desirable, essential and – at the same time – potentially dangerous. Like the epidemic narratives that have been analysed, the peculiar historical phase we recently passed through dramatised in ambivalent and complex terms what Wald describes as "the most basic of human narratives: the necessity and danger of human contact" (Wald 2008: 2). In the light of the epidemic, literature and other Humanities disciplines assume a crucial role in counteracting the negative connotations attributed to weaponised uses of terms such as 'contagion', 'contact', and 'infection'. Humanities may show the positive value of 'infective' forms of knowledge, of fruitful artistic and textual 'contact zones', and of profitable cultural 'contagion' among people, readers, students, scholars, academics, and researchers from all over the world as a cure against individualism and isolation.

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Notes

1. According to James Reed, diagnostic medicine "may be linked to detective work" because in both cases observation and deduction "are employed in order to arrive at a conclusion" (Reed 2011: 78). It is indicative that Sherlock Holmes's method has often been compared to a form of diagnostic process.
2. After this article's acceptance for publications in *Neo-Victorian Studies*, with the editors' kind agreement, parts of this article (albeit in much less developed form), including my coinage 'The Sherlock Holmes Paradigm', appeared in Italian as 'Sherlock Holmes e il contagio: dai vittoriani ai neo-vittoriani' (see Tomaiuolo 2024).
3. For a comprehensive analysis of contagion in nineteenth-century literature, focusing – among others – on Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853), Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *A Strange Story* (1862), Charles Kingsley's *Two Years Ago* (1857), and Alessandro Manzoni's *I promessi sposi* (1840), see Christensen 2005. For Christensen the notion of "influence" represents, both literally and metaphorically, a "master metaphor" of contagion (Christensen 2005: 7).
4. Among the various medical studies devoted to identifying the real nature of the mysterious "Tapanuli fever", we can mention the research by N. Joel Ehrenkrantz, who attributes the death of Culverton Smith's nephew to "septicemic plague", and argues that the bacterial etiology of the plague was reported in *The Lancet* in 1894 in articles that were certainly accessible to Doyle. In the same year, the bacteriologist Alexander Yersin reported the use of a specific type of gelatin to isolate the causative agent of bubonic plague – as Culverton Smith does with his "gelatine cultivations" (Doyle 1993: 347) – so that the symptoms of the "Tapanuli fever" described by Doyle fit those of the *Yersina pestis* (Ehrenkrantz 1987: 225). Another contemporary medical researcher, Setu K. Vora, proposes an alternative classification of Culverton Smith's biological weapon, since his studies support the case for a deadly Asiatic disease named *septicaemia melioidosis* (also called "the Vietnamese Time Bomb"); Vora concludes his study by saying that the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have identified *B. pseudomallei* as a potential agent for bioterrorism (Vora 2002: 103).
5. In 'The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire', Holmes discovers that Mr. Ferguson's infant child is not the victim of his Peruvian (second) wife, initially accused of vampirism, but of the jealous and partially disabled Jack (Mr. Ferguson's son from his first marriage), who tries to poison his half-brother. This short story negates its supernatural and colonial premises, which seemed to identify a non-Britsh 'Other' as the source of infection, and is coherent with

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'the Sherlock Holmes Paradigm': rather than a monstrous creature coming from a faraway country, in this case the culprit is an upper-class British boy born and bred in the English countryside. In narratives such as Loren D. Estleman's *Sherlock Holmes vs Dracula* (1978) or Ian Edginton, Davide Fabbri and Horacio Domingue's graphic novel *Victorian Undead 2: Sherlock Holmes vs Dracula* (2011), the detective fights against literal vampires, including Count Dracula.

6. For a more recent application of the SHERLOCK platform, see Joung, Ladha et al. 2020.

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