



## Journal of the Short Story in English

Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

45 | Autumn 2005

Varia

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### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/436>

ISSN: 1969-6108

### Publisher

Presses universitaires de Rennes

### Printed version

Date of publication: 1 September 2005

Number of pages: 13-28

ISSN: 0294-04442

### Electronic reference

Ellen Harrington, « Failed Detectives and Dangerous Females: Wilkie Collins, Arthur Conan Doyle, and the Detective Short Story », *Journal of the Short Story in English* [Online], 45 | Autumn 2005, Online since 01 September 2005, connection on 03 December 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/436>

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# Failed Detectives and Dangerous Females: Wilkie Collins, Arthur Conan Doyle, and the Detective Short Story

Ellen Harrington

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That empty-headed puppy, Mr. Matthew Sharpin,  
has made a mess of the case at Rutherford Street,  
exactly as I expected he would.

—Wilkie Collins’s Chief Inspector Theakstone in  
“The Biter Bit”

- 1 What makes this new detective Sharpin fail, in addition to his ego, is his blinding admiration for the culprit, Mrs. Yatman. The policeman’s infatuation for the murderous cook, Priscilla Thursby, in another Wilkie Collins story, “The Policeman and the Cook,”<sup>1</sup> causes him to destroy the evidence of her guilt and set her free. And, most famously, in Arthur Conan Doyle’s “A Scandal in Bohemia,” Sherlock Holmes’s fascination with “the daintiest thing under a bonnet on this planet” (168) causes him to underestimate her and fail his client. In *Domestic Crime and the Victorian Novel*, Anthea Trodd notes the increasing danger that the insertion of the detective into the home environment meant to the ladies of the house,<sup>2</sup> but the women antagonists in these stories embody the inverse of that threat, a theme also seen in the fiction of the day, “that the police are ill-equipped to cope with the guile of the angel in the house” (Trodd 40). Each of these stories poses a “dangerous” woman as a challenge to a detective’s authority. While this plot is certainly derived from the sensation fiction of the same era, presenting an intriguingly dangerous or aggressive woman ultimately in need of men’s stewardship,<sup>3</sup> these stories also emphasize the weakness of the detective, his inherent human vulnerability. This notion of detective failure complicates the idealization of the detective as a figure of social justice that evolves as part of the classic detective formula. Detective fiction’s interest in discipline and justice as well as

the penetration of the figure of the detective into private, domestic, and thus feminine, spheres brings gender concerns to the forefront in many detective stories.

- 2 Both Edgar Allan Poe's C. Auguste Dupin mysteries, published in the 1840s, and Charles Dickens's serialized novel *Bleak House*, published in 1852-53, feature a detached, effective detective who successfully solves his cases (with some missteps in the case of Dickens's Inspector Bucket). The failures that Collins introduces are typical of fiction concerned with contemporary social fears about the power of a professional detective to intrude in the home. The inside job that Sharpin fails to deduce in "The Biter Bit" (1858), a woman conniving to cover an excessive milliner's bill, also appears in Collins's popular 1868 serialized novel *The Moonstone* as Inspector Cuff's wrong solution to the case. Cuff, whom the novel presents as a clear threat to the daughter of the house Rachel, from whom the Moonstone has been stolen, comes into the case as a capable hired detective; Cuff's presumption that Rachel took her own diamond to cover secret debts proves wrong. The case is not solved by the seemingly serviceable Cuff, but by a member of the household aided by an insightful doctor's assistant. Though no recognizable formula for detective fiction exists at the time Collins is writing (indeed, his work helps to establish the formula and, along with Poe's stories, clearly influences Arthur Conan Doyle's depiction of Sherlock Holmes), Collins clearly does not work to mythologize the professional detective as a force of justice like later writers will. Considering Collins, Robert Ashley notes that in several of Collins's detective stories, "the detectives all reach the wrong conclusion" and "the mystery is solved by chance rather than by skillful sleuthing"; Ashley suspects that, "In other words, Collins's detective fiction was in reality a happy accident" (60). I would argue that these failures are not "accidental" or incidental on Collins's part. Collins is deliberately creating detectives who make mistakes or blunder through the process to address fears of police interference in the domestic sphere, though his stories ultimately pose the possibility that such intervention can be beneficial rather than threatening. Collins also constructs the home as a dangerous place in need of intervention: "On the image of home as sanctuary Collins superimposes an image of the home as a nest of secrecy, dissimulation, and criminality..." (Trodd 44). He presents crime as an aspect of the cherished domestic space, an assertion that the Holmes stories will amplify later in the century. As even the famously correct Sherlock Holmes admits in "The Five Orange Pips," "I have been beaten four times—three times by men, and once by a woman" (219). Doyle's stories lack Collins's ambivalence about the figure of the detective, and Holmes's failures serve to further dramatize the importance of detective intrusion into the middle-class home, which the stories also portray as a natural setting for crime. Thus, the detective failures in Collins and Doyle, particularly in cases involving women, bring up contemporary concerns about the domesticity and women's proper place in society, as well as the role of a developing police force in England in the nineteenth century.
- 3 Though he employs many of the same detective characteristics, Collins does not take the figure of the detective as seriously as Poe and Dickens do. His distinctive humor comes through in "The Biter Bit" (1858) as Collins sketches a detective so egotistical and self-serving that his professionalism is immediately suspect.<sup>4</sup> This stock character, the probationary detective with the Dickensian name of Mr. Matthew Sharpin, is easily identifiable as an unreliable narrator, and the reader is encouraged to view his interpretation of the evidence skeptically from the beginning. The story, told through

correspondence, takes on an evidentiary quality of its own that further underlines the identification of reader with detective, since the reader gradually apprehends the story of the narrative through Sharpin's misread clues and the successful detective work of Sergeant Bulmer at the end of the narrative.

- 4 Chief Inspector Theakstone's initial complaint to Sharpin, "You have begun by wasting time, ink, and paper" (270), resonates in the brief story, a comment on writing that reiterates complaints about sensational fiction that is meant for entertainment rather than didacticism or aesthetic value. Sharpin also makes derogatory comments about the "penny-a-line" journalist "(who lives by supplying the newspapers with short paragraphs relating to accidents, offenses, and brief records of remarkable occurrences in general...)" (271) whom he suspects of the crime. This Mr. Jay, a satirical portrayal of the writer, also sits down with "pen, ink and paper," but, unable to write like the loquacious Mr. Sharpin, must lie back down to nurse his apparent hangover (277). This disdain for sensational journalism is doubly humorous coming from the immoral Sharpin in the course of a sensational story, and Sharpin's own report writing is later called "pages of feeble scribble-scrabble" (288). Collins, using the underlying association between detective and reader, also makes the outright comparison between detective and sensational writer, someone who develops and presents the narrative of crime.
- 5 By initiating the correspondence with the charge that Sharpin has blackmailed his way into the position, "I think that giving him this unheard-of chance among us, is, in plain words, pretty much like giving him hush money to keep him quiet" (269), Theakstone has effectively characterized Sharpin as a near-criminal himself, blurring the line with the criminal underworld that he will be investigating. Sharpin's comic egotism, his blunt dismissal of his prudent superiors, ("You are rather an elderly person, and, as such, naturally inclined to be a little jealous of men like me, who are in the prime of their lives and their faculties," 270) encourages the reader to hope for Sharpin's failure like the detectives who must work with him. Ultimately, the story provides an ending that implicates the lady of the house and, through his failure, the detective himself.
- 6 Sharpin relentlessly pursues the hapless Mr. Jay through the intrigue of aiding a friend to elope, duplicating Jay's actions in the interest of being a good detective, down to ordering the same dinner. The detective employs many excessively complicated modes of surveillance, but lacks the common sense to interpret the information that he obtains. Sharpin is openly fascinated by the flirtatious Mrs. Yatman, the real criminal: "I could go to the world's end with that woman, if only Mr. Yatman would die" (281). Sharpin's vaguely threatening wish, expressed to his superior, the Chief Inspector, only further demonstrates his unfitness for his office. Mrs. Yatman is described little beyond Sharpin's raptures and her fondness for fine clothes, but she is sharp enough to realize that she can evade detection herself by charming the new detective, confusing him about the nature of her obvious crime. She effectively manipulates him by flattering him about his complicated surveillance and fostering and aiding his hare-brained attempts to trap Mr. Jay, proving herself to be the very opposite of the charming domestic angel that Sharpin assumes her to be. Mrs. Yatman is based on a stock character herself, the wily conniving female that steals and feigns illness to manipulate men; she commits an intimate theft in her bedroom against her husband. When he dismisses Sharpin, Theakstone comments, "If we are to have a new recruit among us,

we should infinitely prefer Mrs. Yatman” (294), a dig enhanced by its gender implications.<sup>5</sup>

- 7 While this humorous, lighthearted story is hardly meant to be a serious critique, it admits the possibility of police corruption and excessive self-interest; taken along with Collins’s other failed detectives, it illustrates contemporary misgivings about assuming a detective will be disinterested or capable simply by virtue of his profession.<sup>6</sup> But Sharpin’s humorous failure also serves to demonstrate the value of the real detectives’ unobtrusive success. The other detectives in the story, Sergeant Bulmer and Chief Inspector Theakstone, are portrayed as capable detectives worthy of their positions; Collins supplants the problematic detective with the genuine article, disinterested and insightful professionals who quickly solve the case by reading the clues that Sharpin has misread. Though the story openly evokes fears of detective failure and the problematic use of authority, it immediately resolves them in a satisfying ending that reassures the reader about the efficacy of the detective. Also, this detective story openly uses themes from the sensation fiction, figuring women as dangerous criminals to society in general and to detectives in particular and demonstrating that the detective’s underestimating women’s abilities, particularly by idealizing them as household angels, can cause a detective to fail to apprehend the real criminal. However, the story’s experienced detectives do not fall into the trap of idealizing the woman criminal.
- 8 A detective’s willful refusal to work in service of justice can also cause the system to fail. Collins begins “The Policeman and the Cook” (1880) with the policeman’s deathbed confession, using this ironic twist on the criminal’s relief of a guilty conscience to self-consciously emphasize the blurred line between police and offenders. The narrative, encouraged by and recorded by the priest giving last orders is meant to be “public acknowledgement of my fault, as an act of penance becoming to a Catholic Englishman” (141); this identifies the policeman as a member of an unpopular church and also provides absolution as a motive for his confession. The frame narrative seems designed to attest to the utter truthfulness of the sensational story, since no penitent, religious man would want to die with a false confession on his lips; the narrator can vouch for the sensational story, a testament to its essential truth, and the entire narrative is comprised of letters and documentary evidence right down to the inscription on the murder weapon.
- 9 As the flashback narrative begins, Collins also sets the stage with the necessary sensational accoutrements of chilly weather and a distressed character’s announcement that “Murder’s the matter” (142). Despite the drama of the scene, the detective still has time to admire the messenger, “I was partial in those days to a tall figure—and she was, as they say, my style” (142), a fact that will become significant in the older detective’s reconstruction of his earlier investigation. The detective checks the veracity of her statement, and the narrative closely follows his impeccable procedure, checking on the landlady, lodgers, and visitors to determine possible suspects and access to the crime scene. An outsider could not have committed the crime, and the story seems to take on a supernatural twist when the murdered man’s wife makes the claim that she must have killed him in her sleep.
- 10 This Gothic twist is quickly disproved, however, and the wife is cleared when no other evidence of her guilt than her own fears can be produced, and the other members of the household are gradually eliminated as suspects. The major piece of incriminating

evidence, the bloody knife, unfamiliar and bearing an unfinished inscription to the murder victim, cannot be traced: “We were defeated” (152). In the meantime, the policeman has fallen in love with the cook with the “tall figure” and needs to earn a better position to have the funds to marry: “he felt that he might rise to the highest position in the police force if he succeeded where his elders and betters had failed” (153). This ambition leads him to question by chance engravers whom the inquiry might have missed where even the detective happens to be; the accidental discovery of the correct engraver leads the detective to realize that his betrothed, the cook and certainly the least likely suspect, committed the crime as revenge after her lover jilted her. Thus, in Collins’s wonderfully black irony, the policeman’s good Victorian work ethic and ambition to advance himself have led him to the realization that his betrothed is the killer, though the detective will not send her to the gallows. He shirks his detective duty for the inclination of a lover, and allows the cook to escape.

- 11 The cook, Priscilla Thurlby, is described by the policeman as “sharp and active” and “a woman I could trust” who had an excellent letter of reference (153). After refusing his attempts at seduction, Priscilla is deserted by her fiancé after the marriage banns had been published. She claims, “the devil entered into me” when the opportunity to strike back at him: “I had the knife in my hand, and the thought came to me to do it, so that they might hang *her* [his current wife] for his murder” (160). She then addresses the policeman, to whom she had become engaged in the interim, “Mind this! I did really like you—I didn’t say Yes, because you could hardly hang your own wife, if you found out who killed Zebedee” (160). Collins thus presents the familiar sensational image of the woman victimized by the man she trusted most acting out with violence in vengeance. Her final denial serves to emphasize her crafty nature, since her manipulation of the policeman protects her from punishment for her crime in the way that she had foreseen, though she denies the motive.
- 12 The story ends with a nudge at the righteous reader: “Many people may think I deserve to be hanged myself for not having given her up to the gallows. They may, perhaps, be disappointed when they see this confession, and hear that I have died decently in my bed. I don’t blame them” (160). The notion that God failed to intervene in this miscarriage of justice highlights the divine failure alongside the detective’s moral one. This ironic twist demonstrates the futility of idealizing the figure of the detective, who is clearly prey to the same human failings that afflict all humankind. The policeman’s passion has undermined his professionalism.
- 13 By repeatedly depicting the failure or incidental success of the professional detective characters, Collins works against the mythologization of the forces of law and order that occurs so pointedly in Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories. At the same time, both of his failed detectives are new recruits who become emotionally involved in their cases. It may be that Collins is not so much affirming fears of the detective’s misuse of power as he is advocating for a certain type of experienced detective to carefully intervene.<sup>7</sup> The ambivalence about detective intervention is largely put to rest in the resolution of “The Biter Bit,” though “The Policeman and the Cook” leaves the possibility of misuse of power open, offering only the belated confession. In these stories, Collins also replays the narrative of the dangerous, underestimated female that we glimpse throughout sensation fiction. Lillian Nayder examines the doubleness in Collins’s writing, which benefits when critics “examin[e] both its subversive and its conventional sides and declin[e] to privilege one at the cost of the other” (xii-xiii). In

general his fiction seems disinclined to idealize the detective, wary of this figure, yet it admits some need for his intervention. At the same time, Collins's work effectively demonstrates gender inequities and showcases the victimization of women, while still affirming stereotypes about gender.<sup>8</sup> As Nayder notes, Collins's sometimes subversive critiques are often countered by his stories' conventional resolutions.

- 14 After Collins's cynical take on the human failings and shortcomings of his detectives, the characterization of Sherlock Holmes presents a famously positive take on the detective. Despite the characteristics that make Holmes aberrant, his cocaine use, his ambiguous sexuality, his unemotional self-control, he is idealized as the perfect detective through the eyes of Watson, an unforgettable rendering of the late-nineteenth-century, rational man of science. Doyle's characterization of Sherlock Holmes in "A Scandal in Bohemia" can be read in answer to Collins's equivocal take on the figure of the detective. Though not a professional detective in the police force, the amateur Holmes has taken care to professionalize by educating himself, though his detective work forms only an incidental source of income. Holmes's characterization is, in some respects, a caricature of rational masculinity, and, in "A Scandal in Bohemia," Doyle chooses to define Holmes in relation to an exceptional woman.
- 15 Holmes makes a point of citing and inviting Watson's position as chronicler, "since you are interested in these little problems, and since you are good enough to chronicle one or two of my trifling experiences, you may be interested in this" (163). As with Collins's documentary first-person narratives, Watson's narrative perspective influences the reader. His acceptance of Holmes's foibles further legitimates Holmes in the eyes of the reader, and Watson acts as an effective foil for the great detective, also allowing the reader to feel somewhat superior to Watson's blunt, well-meaning everyman. The appealingly traditional voice of Watson's narrative mediates "between the reader's desultory puzzling and the great detective's intense investigations" (Fowler 155). Watson's sensational gloss on Holmes's (pretended) original narrative of ratiocination helps give this fiction the edge of adventure that is so appealing. By mediating the idiosyncrasies of the great detective, Watson enables our amusement and admiration while fostering a lenient attitude to those necessary flaws that surely accompany genius.
- 16 Within this fiction of rationality played out in sensational, melodramatic narratives, Irene Adler becomes the worthy female opponent, "the woman," as she and Holmes enact a battle of wits that is self-consciously tinged with the attributes of gender: "She has the face of the most beautiful of women, and the mind of the most resolute of men" (Doyle 166). Unlike Holmes's evil nemesis Professor Moriarity, Irene Adler acts primarily in her own interest, rather than for the systematic detriment of others, and she does not reappear to challenge Holmes again. This sexual chemistry in "A Scandal in Bohemia" (1892) initiates the successful run of the Holmes stories in *The Strand* after the less commercially impressive start of the two novellas *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) and *The Sign of Four* (1890).
- 17 In the very beginning of this story, Watson sets forth the adversarial, charged relationship of Holmes and Adler:

To Sherlock Holmes, she is always *the* woman. I have seldom heard him mention her under any other name. In his eyes she eclipses and predominates the whole of her sex. It was not that he felt any emotion akin to love for Irene Adler. All emotions, and that one particularly, were abhorrent to his cold, precise but admirably balanced mind. He was, I take it, the most perfect reasoning and observing machine

that the world has seen, but as a lover he would have placed himself in a false position. He never spoke of the softer passions, save with a gibe and a sneer. They were admirable things for the observer—excellent for drawing the veil from men's motives and actions. But for the trained observer to admit such intrusions into his own delicate and finely adjusted temperament was to introduce a distracting factor which might throw doubt upon all his mental results. Grit in a sensitive instrument, or a crack in one of his own high-power lenses, would not be more disturbing than a strong emotion in a nature such as his. And yet there was but one woman to him, and that woman was the late Irene Adler, of dubious and questionable mystery. (162)

- 18 This reads something like an ascetic creed for Holmes, yet each marvelous scientific metaphor for objectivity comes up against “the woman.” Watson’s portrait of Holmes describes Adler as well; as Holmes removes himself from romantic “intrusions,” she remains tantalizingly out of reach. The rational mind of the master detective is repeatedly set against the opaque femininity of his adversary, as Watson protests too much the analytic purity of his friend. This barrier to the “grit” of the “softer passions” is depicted as essential to the perfect functioning of Holmes’s rational mind, which utilizes this weakness in others to trip them up. Even so, this case proves to be one of Holmes’s rare failures: though he boldly ascertains the whereabouts of the blackmail evidence, an imprudent photo of the youthful Crown Prince with his lover, Holmes underestimates her self-knowledge as she manipulates him with a rare flourish of her own. Before she flees, Irene Adler replaces the compromising photograph with a glamorous picture of her alone, the treasure that Holmes gallantly requests in payment for his services.
- 19 Irene Adler interrupts relations between men in several ways: she conducts an affair on equal sexual terms; she threatens to disrupt the King’s politically and financially advantageous marriage; she intervenes in the professional exchange between Holmes and the King by removing Holmes’s ability to deliver the dangerous photograph; she gives herself in marriage to an equally handsome man, foregrounding her own desires; and she acts for herself rather than relying on her new husband to counter the effects of Holmes’s offensive maneuvers. In essence, she forces Holmes to re-examine his facile presumptions about femininity, and Doyle’s largely conventional narrative moves to re-negotiate the boundaries of desirable femininity. After the disguised Holmes admiringly gazes at her, following her to gather information, she disguises herself and follows him home, meeting his challenge. Interestingly, Adler’s independent financial position makes her stand all the more provocative. In “A Scandal in Bohemia,” part of what makes Irene Adler so threatening is that there is no man in her life, father or husband, who can be approached in a gentlemanly fashion to put a stop to her threat against the King. She effectively subverts this process by acting for herself and negotiating for herself. Though the lady’s marriage provides a kind of ultimate protection from the King, the story presents Adler as the initiator, the one in control of the situation.<sup>9</sup>
- 20 The characteristics that set Irene Adler apart do not demonize her in the expected pattern of the sensation narrative; instead, her forthright sexuality, her boldness, her use of drag to expand the range of spaces she can comfortably enter make her more desirable to Holmes, who mocks the King’s regret that she is not, as he puts it, on his level. The story presents Holmes’s admiration for the adventurous Adler as a measure of his own worth and his open-mindedness. In the text, Holmes’s professional arrogance is more justified than the King’s personal arrogance, since the King values

people for their birth rather than their own worth. Interestingly, Holmes's intellect and ethics seem to make him a savvier candidate for governance than the selfish, egotistical King. Holmes prioritizes worth differently than the King does, and Holmes does not read Adler's fearless, aggressive femininity as an impediment to marriage at all.

- 21 As the long quotation cited earlier illustrates, this story presents an ironic rewriting of the classic narrative of unrequited love via Watson, who is depicted as having a more typical love life. Irene lives on in the "dubious and questionable memory" of the public (162), but Holmes retains a wistful attitude and a special designation for the departed lady: "He used to make merry over the cleverness of women, but I have not heard him do it of late. And when he speaks of Irene Adler, or when he refers to her photograph, it is always under the honorable title of *the woman*" (175). Her beauty and self-sufficiency recommend her as a Holmesian prototype, "the woman," the worthy opponent to man as represented by the detective. Adler's femininity and sexual viability are foregrounded in the narrative to compensate for the quick intellect and logical mind that reveal the hard, decisive substance of her personality. Even in the story finally told after her death, Adler remains a type at once superior and inimitable, who effectively challenged Holmes, disturbing his complacency and superior stance. This disruption of ordinary typology serves to humanize Holmes, the "formidable antagonist," and seems to further enhance his credibility by placing this singular instance of his vulnerability in the past: "the defeats by men remain apocryphal, whereas Irene Adler's outmaneuvering of him ... is central to the Holmes legend" (Hodgson 7). In the telling, this "outmaneuvering" of Holmes seems to be more a compliment to him than the reverse, teasing the reader with the hint of a desiring, sentimental man within the "most perfect reasoning and observing machine the world has seen" (Doyle 109).
- 22 "A Scandal in Bohemia" proves a counterpoint to the rest of the Holmes canon. Rarely does Holmes offer women more than friendly interest or paternal concern for their well being, as is proper for a Victorian gentleman.<sup>10</sup> Though many of the women in the Holmes fiction are weak or victimized, the Holmes stories present a variety of women who plan or commit crimes. Doyle's demonstrated interest in these sensational female criminals highlights the tension between the two types of femininity that show up in the Holmes texts, that angelic/dangerous binary that Irene Adler effectively troubles. "The Adventure of the Illustrious Client" inverts "A Scandal in Bohemia"; an innocent, aristocratic young woman is dissuaded from marriage when Holmes presents her with her fiancé's diary, which serves as a catalogue of small trophies from her previous lovers. Another one of his wronged lovers takes advantage of her position as Holmes's informant to throw vitriol on the preying bachelor. "The Problem of Thor Bridge" reveals the cruel machinations of a wife whose husband has fallen in love with the governess; she kills herself in a manner that implicates the young woman in her murder. Both of these violent women, however, have clearly been wronged, and Holmes's interest in exposure and reconstructing the motives for the crime emphasizes his sympathy for them. "The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire" toys with the possibility of violent female sexuality in a foreign woman, whom Holmes redeems by showing her true humanitarian motives. While this scenario affirms a sympathetic view of women, it also firmly reinscribes the male subject position as the dominant one. Ultimately, the enigmatic figure of Sherlock Holmes registers a conventional sensibility in most of the stories: women are creatures to be pitied and protected, both from others and from themselves.

- 23 Most of Holmes's encounters display this traditional attitude, reinforcing his personal superiority in a manner that ironically reflects his own criticism of the King of Bohemia. As a proper scion of the British Empire, Holmes generously, paternalistically aids the women who come to ask for his advice, often working against the male relatives who are supposed to act as guardians for them. More than liberation, this fiction encourages a kind of good stewardship by men of their household women on behalf of society, thus reaffirming a primary theme of sensation fiction. Upright male readers could assure themselves of their virtue in maintaining proper, gentle households: "To keep women down and yet to need them as wives, mothers, housekeepers, lovers, means there is constant pressure, constant fear that the male dominance will crack" (Knight, "The Case of the Great Detective" 374). This fear is usually assuaged in the Holmes stories, which offer in Holmes and Watson moral examples of manhood who serve and protect that fair sex.
- 24 Thus, the Holmes stories ultimately reaffirm the detective as a moral force working in favor of the status quo. As Stephen Knight comments in his substantial analysis of the stories in *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*, Holmes was a hero shaped for a particular class in a particular time and place..." (103). Despite Holmes's more liminal attributes, he functions with Watson to affirm and support the existing social order, demonstrating that legal and extra-legal policing works to protect women and colonial subjects from themselves and victimizing men. Though the Adler case is technically a failure, its portrayal of Holmes both humanizes him and mythologizes him as a detective, further supporting his mandate as a force of justice and emphasizing his middle-class disdain for the excesses of royalty. Holmes's admiration for Adler is the result of, rather than the cause of, the failure of the case. In light of this model, the failures of Collins's detectives seem all the more interesting: his failing detectives, whether humorous or serious, highlight the human flaws in a detective who cannot function perfectly as a "reasoning machine." Collins's stories highlighting detective failures demonstrate a deep-rooted ambivalence about the role of the detective even as they seem to establish the need for a detective in the household. His cases work because the detective is shown to be no more than a normal human being, ruled by urges and desires as well as moral training. Collins's use of first-person narratives in the form of letters and documents also emphasize the variable nature of each account, the different "truths" apparent in an investigative situation, though each story finishes with a clear acknowledgement of what happened. In comparison, Watson's authoritative retelling of Holmes's adventures retrospectively gives the truth of the solved case (though Holmes delights in criticizing Watson's sensationalism).
- 25 All three female antagonists in these three stories are aggressors, "dangerous" women whose sexual desire or greed is addressed openly in the narrative, though Adler and Thursby are both victims of men first. Holmes's admiration of Adler because of her outright sexuality and bold actions elevates her from the conniving heroine that the others represent to "the woman," a superior type. Collins's detectives are confronted with the failure of the ideal of the Victorian "angel in the house," and all three female antagonists use the men's presumptions about female weakness and moral superiority to outwit them. The concerns about detective intrusions into the home that inform the failures in the Collins stories are replaced by the Holmes stories' resounding demonstration of the necessity of such interventions into the private sphere, which the stories characterize as a common site for crime. Traveling outside of London in "The

Adventure of the Copper Beeches,” Holmes explains to Watson: “You look at these scattered houses, and you are impressed by their beauty. I look at them and the only thought that comes to be is a feeling of their isolation and of the impunity with which crime may be committed there” (323). The Victorian complaint<sup>11</sup> that readers of sensation fiction would be inclined to peer beneath the facades of the apparently respectable neighbors becomes realized as a desirable norm by the turn of the century.

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## NOTES

1. This story was originally published as "Who Killed Zebedee?" in 1881, according to Michael Cox. This later title, "The Policeman and the Cook," which parallels the other titles in the Collins short fiction anthology *Little Novels* (1887) highlights the gender binary that I wish to emphasize here.
2. As Trodd explains, the policeman is often figured as an "intruder in the home" in the fiction of this time; "The fiction and journalism of this period yield ample proof of widespread middle-class fears of police intrusion and surveillance" (11).
3. Susan Jones describes the typical plot of the sensation novel, "The action of these novels, concerned with the drama of concealed identities, conflicts over property and inheritance, and the unearthing of guilty secrets of disease and madness, takes place within the confines of the family in a domestic setting" (308). This popular fiction naturally focused on gender through its subject matter emphasizing family and the domestic, and it often featured amateur or professional detectives as characters without focusing the plot on a single case or puzzle in the way that would come to characterize detective fiction. Michael Cox comments that sensation fiction is the bridge between Poe and the true detective story of Arthur Conan Doyle at the end of the century (xv).
4. The title "The Biter Bit" itself references Aesop's fable "The Viper and the File." The humorous reference to the story's sexual politics, as well as its detective interplay, points out the multiple possibilities for the role of biter.
5. By contemporary standards a woman is not a fit professional detective; women will not serve as police until the twentieth century, though they appear sooner in fiction, notably in two novels featuring professional female detectives published in the 1860s, W.S. Hayward's *The Revelations of a Lady Detective* (1861) and Andrew Forester Junior's *The Female Detective* (1864). See Patricia Craig and Mary Cadogan's *The Lady Investigates* (15).

6. In this, Collins anticipates the self-interested detectives that Joseph Conrad sketches in the corrupt world of *The Secret Agent* (1906); it will eventually become a familiar image to connect detectives to vampires or cannibals, since they depend on crime, an image that the title “The Biter Bit” anticipates. Also, Israel Zangwill’s *The Big Bow Mystery* (1892) is one of the first novels to make the detective into a malicious criminal, fueling suspense by withholding his guilt from the reader in a classic locked-room mystery.

7. Cuff’s failure in *The Moonstone* brings up the same issue. While Cuff is a resourceful, politic, and insightful professional detective, it is more class-appropriate for Franklin Blake and Ezra Jennings to intervene in the upper-class world of the novel.

8. In *Wilkie Collins*, Lillian Nayder discusses this aspect of Collins in his early writing: “Like *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*, Collins’s early novels focus on gender relations as well as race relations and depict the victimization of women by tyrannical men who physically assault them, incarcerate them, and threaten their well-being. At the same time, Collins qualifies his social criticism in these early works, as he does in his later fiction, by highlighting the dangers of female nature and the barbarism of the subject races, reinscribing the social norms and stereotypes that he sets out to critique” (15).

9. In contrast, Doyle’s depiction of the *femme sole* Lady Frances Carfax works against this strong positioning. In “The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax,” the supposedly independent woman in question is tricked by a fraudulent preacher and almost buried alive; this plot presents the discourse of paternalistic protection of lone women that emerges in many of the other Holmes stories.

10. Before a meeting with the nefarious stepfather in “A Case of Identity,” Holmes comments, “It is just as well that we should do business with the male relatives” (198). This highlights an interesting conflict: while Holmes might prefer to handle business with other men, in this case, it is the legal guardian who is the victimizer.

11. See Alfred Austin’s “Our Novels: The Sensational School”: But if people will persist in prying overmuch into the affairs of their immediate acquaintance, they are sure to end up by imputing to them a host of faults and vices, perhaps of crimes, and the modern sensation novel gratifies the same petty taste that hungers for depreciatory tittle-tattle and scandalous violence” (424). Trodd also remarks on this common complaint, specifically citing Henry Mansel’s 1863 article “Sensation Novels” in the *Quarterly Review* and Leslie Stephen’s 1869 article “The Decay of Murder” in *Cornhill*.

## ABSTRACTS

La nouvelle policière est un genre littéraire populaire à partir de la deuxième moitié du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Spécifique à ce genre, le personnage de l’inspecteur de police y est souvent idéalisé parce que ses enquêtes sont menées au nom de la justice sociale. Celles-ci ne sont cependant pas toujours couronnées de succès. La défaite de l’inspecteur peut alors exprimer l’inquiétude d’une intrusion du collectif dans le domaine privé du foyer.

Lorsque le foyer comprend des personnages féminins séduisants, l’enquête reflète une inquiétude plus complexe qui fait intervenir la notion des genres. Ainsi, dans « The Policeman and the Cook » (Le policier et la cuisinière) de Wilkie Collins, ce n’est pas seulement son amour propre qui entraîne le jeune inspecteur à l’échec ; c’est aussi la fascination que la jeune femme coupable exerce sur sa personne. Aveuglé par ses appas, l’inspecteur détruit les preuves de sa culpabilité

pour, finalement, laisser la meurtrière partir en toute liberté. De même dans la nouvelle, bien plus connue, d'Arthur Conan Doyle « A Scandal in Bohemia » (Un scandale en Bohème), fasciné par « la créature la plus joliment chapotée sur terre » Sherlock Holmes manque à mener à bien son enquête. Dans chacune de ses histoires, les personnages féminins s'opposent au stéréotype de la « fée du logis » pour constituer des antagonistes dangereux.

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