ELEMENTARY, MY DEAR JOAN

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What do Batman, Dr. Gregory House, and Adrian Monk all have in common? Believe it or not, these characters are just three of many inspired by Sherlock Holmes. The Internet Movie Database lists 270 screen adaptations of the Sherlock Holmes character, which includes neither characters who were simply inspired by him, nor other forms of media such as novels, radio, and theatre. Over 25,000 Sherlock Holmes productions and products existed in 1994; since then, that number has grown[1]. In fact, the past four years have seen a surge in Sherlock Holmes' mainstream popularity with three successful screen adaptations running concurrently: the Warner Bros. film franchise, BBC's *Sherlock*, and CBS's *Elementary*.

Along with his stamp on popular culture, Sherlock Holmes affects the world in the same way all media does. The media is not only reflective of the attitudes of society, but it actively shapes those attitudes and informs the opinions of its audiences. Studies show that the media can affect both self-image and opinion of others[2][3]. Professors Kristen Harrison and Nicole Martins conducted a survey in the U.S. which demonstrated that television consumption boosts the self-esteem of white boys while decreasing the self-esteem of other children[4]. However, it is not just children who are influenced by the media, so it's important to ask oneself, "Are the messages being sent by the media helpful or harmful?" This is a question which feminist media critics attempt to answer.

Feminist critics usually focus on the representation of women in media, as there are many problematic elements in most films and shows. Most reviews begin with the Bechdel Test[5], though some feel this is not a fair assessment when analyzing individual works. While it's true

[1] DeWaal, *The Universal Sherlock Holmes*
[2] Graydon, "How the Media Keeps Us HUNG UP"
[3] Jackson, "Images of Islam"
[4] Goldberg, "TV can boost self-esteem"
[5] The Bechdel Test uses three requirements: 1. The work must have at least two named women. 2. Who talk to each other. 3. About something other than a man.

not all stories would benefit from the Bechdel Test, nor that a pass guarantees the story is feminist, it's a good starting point to judge a work's attitude towards women. Feminist critics tend to spend more time, however, considering problematic tropes, characterization, character dynamics, and how narratives code misogyny; a thorough, third-wave feminist review also makes intersectional[6] considerations. When looking at media critically, one must remember that no story exists in a vacuum as well as consider how stories contribute harmful media trends. Because Sherlock Holmes is so well-known, new adaptations of the stories tend to generate a lot of interest, which results in considerable impact on public opinion; there are many nuances to note, but simply looking at changes made from canon[7] and the reasons for those changes, as well as how they stand up to the Bechdel Test and basic feminist standards, will allow for a decent picture of their feminist rankings. To determine which of the three currently running Sherlock Holmes adaptations has most effectively updated the source material for a modern, more progressive audience, one can begin by analyzing the first two Warner Bros. films, the first two BBC *Sherlock* seasons, and the first seven episodes of CBS's *Elementary*[8] with these ideas in mind.

In late 2009, the first movie in Warner Bros.'s Sherlock Holmes franchise, titled simply *Sherlock Holmes*, hit theaters; the film's sequel, subtitled *A Game of Shadows*, aired two years later. For the most part, Warner Bros. was conservative in its adjustments, mainly concerned

[6] Intersectionality is a feminist concept which observes that oppressive constructs like sexism, racism, homophobia, ableism, etc. are all interconnected and should not be viewed separately.

[7] "Canon" is a fan subculture term used to differentiate official events in the source media from events in fan works and speculation. It was first used in this context to separate Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories from adaptations by other authors (Knox, "Studies in the Literature"). In this essay, all mentions of canon are in reference to Arthur Conan Doyle's work.

[8] By the time it reaches the reader, there is likely to be much more material available for each of these adaptations than is analyzed in this paper. It is the author's hope that the reader won't take this analysis as an attempt to make a static statement, but instead observe the tools used and judge future material for themselves.

with presenting Holmes in a contemporary, action-packed tone to ensure broader accessibility[9]. However, to include the sex- and romance-driven tension expected of successful modern blockbusters, the Warner Bros. crew made significant changes to the characterization and roles of the two most notable women from canon: Mary Morstan and Irene Adler.

Though Morstan's characterization is quite true to canon, her dynamic with Holmes is far less friendly. Rather than first meeting Holmes and Watson as a client, as in *The Sign of the Four*, Morstan is introduced to Holmes following her engagement to Watson. Also, though in the original stories Holmes was at best polite and at worst indifferent to Holmes and Morstan's relationship, in both WB films he tries to dissuade Watson from marrying her. These changes seem to serve little purpose other than creating tension between Holmes and Watson.

Irene Adler, on the other hand, is completely unrecognizable when compared to her canon counterpart. The films portray Adler as a trigger-happy professional thief and love interest to Holmes——a far cry from the opera singer who met Holmes just long enough to outwit him before disappearing to America with her husband. And though in the books Watson says Holmes felt no "emotion akin to love for Irene Adler," in the 2009 movie Holmes expresses conflicted interest, and Irene hints at a sexual history; in the sequel Holmes' feelings for Adler are quite clear. While the changes to her dynamic with Holmes are clearly present to create that sex- and romance-driven tension previously mentioned, writing Irene as a criminal seems to be to give her a reason for working for Professor Moriarty.

Ironically (or not, depending on one's opinion of Hollywood), despite the intentional changes in tone and characterization for the modern day, both films struggle with many standards of feminist film criticism. Neither film passes the full Bechdel Test, as none of the

[9] Fischer, "Exclusive Interview"

women ever meet or speak to each other. Furthermore, the women themselves have no motivations or tidbits of characterization which do not revolve around male characters.

Though the narrative practically begs the audience to believe that Adler is intellectually equal or superior to Holmes, each time she gains the upper hand (over Holmes or otherwise) involves brute force——and sometimes that force is applied not by her own hand, but by those of male protectors. The films strip her of the original character's defining quality: outwitting Sherlock Holmes. The narrative also subjects Adler to double standards, like presenting her thievery and trigger-happiness as dangerous, whereas Holmes stealing items and "wasting bullets" are quirky. The most problematic double-standard is how Adler's emotions are treated compared to Holmes' emotions. While Adler's feelings for Holmes are her downfall, Holmes' emotions (regarding both Adler and Watson) fuel him toward success. This contributes to the attitude that women's emotions make them weak, whereas men's emotions make them strong; stereotypically "feminine" emotions such as sadness and sentiment are considered weaker and less rational than stereotypically "masculine" emotions such as anger and hatred. Furthermore, "feminine" emotional outbursts displayed by either gender are stigmatized, as are "masculine" emotional outbursts displayed by women (but not men)[10]. Finally, Irene is killed before the opening credits of the second film to demonstrate Moriarty's ruthlessness and to advance Holmes' emotional arc. The second part of this is an example of a trope called "Women in Refrigerators," in which a female character is killed to further a male character's journey. This is damaging because, as feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian points out,

> Writers are using the Women in Refrigerators trope to literally trade the female character's life for the benefit of a male hero's story arc. They are making clear that women, even powerful female superheroes are basically disposable . . . . It is saddening

[10] Dziura, "Bullish Life"

> to see how flippantly and trivially violence against women is treated in [the media], especially when violence against women in the real world are [sic] at epidemic levels.[11]

Next, mid-2010 welcomed the first three-episode season of the BBC's *Sherlock*, an adaptation set in the modern day; its second season aired a year and a half later at the start of 2012. With such a dramatically different time-period, modifying canon is unavoidable, and the women of the Sherlock Holmes universe are not exempt. Mrs. Hudson gets a promotion in *Sherlock* from her canon days: no longer simply a landlady-slash-housekeeper, she also functions as a motherly figure and one of Sherlock's only friends. Mary Morstan is completely absent, replaced with a string of brief girlfriends. However, several characters who were male in the original canon are genderbent in this adaptation, including Drs. Mortimer and Stapleton from *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, and the mentioned-but-not-seen sister (rather than brother) of John's: Harriet "Harry" Watson.

No less immune to the femme fatale than Hollywood, *Sherlock* presents Irene as a lesbian dominatrix with a habit of blackmailing her powerful clients. In contrast to the original Adler, who blackmailed her ex-lover to ensure he wouldn't interfere with her marriage, the BBC's Irene primarily uses blackmail to protect herself when she "misbehaves"——until the events of the episode, in which she attempts to blackmail the British government itself for a large sum of money. Irene is also a love interest to Holmes, despite both her claimed homosexuality in the show and her lack of any romantic interest whatsoever in canon.

Despite the opportunities a modern setting presents, *Sherlock* and its writers have come under a lot of feminist criticism. Of its six movie-length episodes, only one manages to fully pass the Bechdel Test, scraping by with two quick exchanges in separate scenes. The other five episodes feature multiple named women, but they do not speak to each other.

[11] Sarkeesian, "#2 Women in Refrigerators"

According to canon, "[Holmes] had a remarkable gentleness and courtesy in his dealings with women. He disliked and distrusted the sex, but he was always a chivalrous opponent"[12]. Watson also notes in the canon, after Holmes is bested by Irene Adler, that he no longer "make[s] merry over the cleverness of women"[13]. While one cannot expect Victorian stories to meet today's feminist standards, one of the main functions of the short story "A Scandal in Bohemia" was to challenge Holmes' low opinion of women and codify misogyny as undesirable[14]. *Sherlock,* unfortunately, fails to consistently codify Holmes' sexism as a character flaw; in fact, the narrative often seems to be unaware of it at all. While this version of Holmes is mostly disrespectful to people in general, it should be noted that he disrespects men and women differently. As one critic explains,

> When Sherlock Holmes is insulting a man, he immediately attacks his intellect. . . .But when he's attacking a woman, he attacks her sexuality, her looks, her profession. Sally is degraded for her affair with Anderson, Molly is manipulated and verbally abused because of her looks, Irene is judged for her profession, John's various girlfriends are brushed off as little more than accessories in John's life (something John himself is guilty of), and Mrs. Hudson is treated like a servant more often than not. . . .Men are insulted for their lack of intelligence because they're supposed to be smart. Women, however, are constantly degraded and insulted because they are written as little more than their insecurities and flaws.[15]

Unfortunately, the narrative casts only one of these examples in a negative light, when Sherlock harshly mocks Molly's dress and figure. But the quick apology and kiss on the cheek that she afterward receives from Sherlock don't quite make up for this treatment, especially when considering that Holmes continues to unapologetically manipulate Molly's feelings for him.

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[12] Doyle, "Detective," 92
[13] Doyle, "Scandal," 16
[14] Doyle, "Scandal," 1, 16; Jones, "Is Sherlock sexist?"
[15] Z, "(On your post about Mrs. Hudson)"

The big fish, though, is Irene Adler. Not only is she needlessly sexualized by being changed from an opera singer to a dominatrix, but the narrative perpetuates the stereotype that women are weak and their emotions are irrational when her feelings for Sherlock cause her destruction. Furthermore, she is deprived of her original victory, before being reduced to a damsel-in-distress who is saved by the main male character in her final scene. Jane Clare Jones, a doctoral student of philosophy specializing in feminist ethics, wrote a critical review of the episode for The Guardian. She pointed out that "Adler blatantly fails to outwit Holmes" and summed up the episode as "really quite regressive"[16]. Steven Moffat, co-creator of *Sherlock* and writer of the episode, responded by saying that Adler's victory in canon of "mov[ing] house and run[ning] away with her husband" was "not a feminist victory"[17]. He went on to say that Irene is the true victor because Sherlock cares enough to save her in the end.

However, it's important to look at the core of the original story as well as the context in which it was written; Adler's victory lies in being able to live the life she chooses to live, with the man she chooses to marry. "Conan Doyle's character is something of a 'proto-feminist', [sic] a woman of great intellect and formidable agency, who, above all, proves to be a match for Holmes," explains Jones. In *Sherlock,* Irene is stripped of her agency, and she says herself that she "can't take all the credit" for the cunning plan that was meant to prove her intellect. In fact, she admits she was dependent upon Moriarty to find a use for the sensitive information stolen from her clients, and that he "gave [her] a lot of advice about how to play the Holmes boys". The climactic scene is also steeped in oblivious and cruel misogyny. Not only are Irene's feelings for Sherlock the key to his victory, but she is humiliated for succumbing to sentiment as Sherlock coldly cuts her down. He and the narrative claim his superiority for being logical and

[16] Jones, "Is Sherlock sexist?"
[17] Jeffries, "'There is a clue'"

reasoned, despite the fact that most of the episode was spent exploring Holmes' love for those around him. Moffat's claim that Irene was the real winner because Sherlock saved her simply doesn't hold weight when considering the rest of the episode and the prevalent message in the media that all women inevitably need a male savior. Feminist Sherlockians wondered how Adler had become less progressive in the 21st century and why she was used to demonstrate Sherlock's invincibility and intellect which makes him so magnetic that a self-proclaimed lesbian will fall in love with him and stay in love with him, even after he brutally humiliates her[18]. Though one should note that fluid sexuality is a valid concept in need of better representation in the media, the tone of the episode (and the show at large) does not speak to raising this awareness. Instead, it applauds Sherlock's ability to turn lesbians while shying away from any legitimate queering of his relationship John, despite Irene drawing comparisons between her own feelings for Sherlock and John's feelings for Sherlcok. So Irene is additionally problematic by representing the ideas that sexuality is only fluid when flowing towards heterosexuality and that gay women only need to find the right man——made doubly worse when her queer relationship gets little more than a couple of passing mentions, as they are not as important as her heteronormative relationship with the lead male, who draws her back to the traditional, oppressive gender role of a straight, submissive woman. As Jane Clare Jones aptly put it, "[Y]ou've got to worry when a woman comes off worse in 2012 than in 1891".

Lastly, in the fall of 2012, CBS began to air the first thirteen-episode season of *Elementary*, its contemporary adaptation set in New York City. *Elementary* makes the most changes to canon of the three adaptations, electing to take the characters' essential traits and roles and throw them into the "real" world; this is contrasted to most adaptations, which usually

[18] Jones, "Is Sherlock sexist?"; Sway, "Sherlock Women"; Stavvers, "Irene Adler"

keep the sometimes fantastical elements of the canon stories. As for the women, Mary Morstan is a man in this adaptation, portrayed as an ex-boyfriend of Watson's named Ty Morstan. By the seventh episode, little has been revealed about Irene Adler, other than the fact that she is dead, which Holmes apparently didn't take well due to their being close. Watson is no longer an injured and discharged ex-army doctor, but an ex-surgeon who walked away from medicine after losing a patient. The doctor now works as a sober companion hired to help Holmes transition from rehab to normal life. Unarguably the biggest and most controversial change, though, was the gender- and race-bending of the white, British John Watson——-now Chinese-American *Joan* Watson.

While casting Watson as a woman of color is certainly a great stride in feminist media, it is often argued amongst Sherlockians whether *Elementary*'s feminist successes are greater than its flaws. All of the first seven episodes include more than one named female character, but only two pass the full Bechdel; though episode five passes with flying colors and several long conversations, episode four only manages to squeeze in a two-sentence exchange before the conversation switches to men.

Since the casting for Watson was first announced, several months before the show aired, critics have claimed that this decision was made solely to create heteronormative sexual tension between Holmes and Watson, contrary to the writers', producers', and actors' repeated assurances that there will be no romance between the leads.[19] Victoria Coren, a newspaper columnist for British newspapers *The Observer* and *The Guardian,* expressed outrage and disgust at the idea of pairing up Holmes and Watson.[20] She pointed out that the executive producer had explained in an interview that many people would wonder if Holmes and Watson

[19] Coren, "Put that in your pipe"; Roberts, "Comic-Con"; Cochran, "'Elementary' star Lucy Liu"
[20] Coren, "Put that in your pipe"

could have a relationship free of sex and romance. Amazingly, the interview which Coren seems to be referring to is the same one in which Robert Doherty, executive producer and creator of *Elementary*, explicitly states that he does not want Holmes and Watson to "end up in bed together," as he feels this is not true to the spirit of the characters and because he wants to demonstrate that a man and a woman can have a platonic relationship that does not inevitably lead to sex[21]. Furthermore, Joan's characterization and backstory have had feminist bloggers at odds. One critic, known online only as Em, claimed before the show aired that her status as a disgraced surgeon rather than an honorably discharged army doctor was not only sexist, but racist and homophobic as well, by relying on stereotypes as well as removing the alleged homoerotic subtext from the classic stories.[22] However, others, like prolific feminist blogger Rosie, were comforted when the fourth episode revealed an important detail:

> I was unhappy and concerned that [the changed backstory] might play into stereotypical and sexist gendered expectations. And I was wrong. Joan CHOSE to stop practicing because of her own personal guilt. It's character depth, and it's not treated as a gendered failing. . . .No one ever says this was her fault, or that she [screwed] up, or that she should take the blame.[23]

Rosie went on to explain that the trauma and guilt which come with Joan's past also serve as a parallel to Sherlock's past and give the characters an area in which they can connect: their attempts to heal and overcome their guilt. One should also note that a woman need not have masculine traits or backgrounds such as military training in order to be a feminist character; she simply needs to be written like a real person with her own thoughts, hopes, and motivations which do not solely revolve around men. Though much of Joan's current life is attached to

[21] Roberts, "Comic-Con"
[22] Em, "Why I View Elementary's Casting"
[23] Rosie, "So, I want to talk"

Sherlock due to her job, the show allows her to have history and present story lines which are not dependent upon him.

Unlike the BBC adaptation, *Elementary* is very careful about presenting Sherlock's sexist tendencies as flaws. This is an even better choice than erasing these traits from his character; instead of ignoring the existence of sexism, the writers make a concerted effort to demonstrate that even kind, heroic people can perpetuate sexism, while not making excuses for that prejudice. Best of all, Joan firmly stands up for herself and explicitly states why Sherlock's behavior is problematic, leaving no room for misunderstanding. While critics like Victoria Coren feared that having the genderbent character in the "junior" or sidekick role would result in a sexist dynamic of a submissive woman with stars in her eyes for the superior man, Joan and Sherlock actually function as equals[24]. They push and pull with equal amounts of ferocity and are not shy about checking each other when boundaries are crossed. This provides an engaging and interesting conflict between the leads without unnecessary sexual overtures. The writers do not catch every single problematic insinuation, of course, but they are definitely miles ahead of many shows currently on television.

The consistency with which *Elementary* has tactfully handled sexism and female characters is what makes the show's lack of recurring women so frustrating. While Joan is certainly a big part of the show, she is also the only female character to appear in more than one episode thus far, causing the show to suffer from the Smurfette Principal. TVTropes.org defines the Smurfette Principle as "the tendency for works of fiction to have exactly one female amongst an ensemble of male characters, in spite of the fact that roughly half of the human race is female"[25]. The Smurfette Principle is also why *Elementary* struggles to pass the Bechdel Test

[24] Coren, "Put that in your pipe"
[25] Sarkeesian, "#3 The Smurfette"

more often, despite having a female lead. The bright side to the appearance of this trope is that, unlike many other "Smurfettes" on television, Joan doesn't fall victim to tokenism by being written as a racist or sexist stereotype, and though she is a female version of a male character in the literal sense, she is not a carbon copy of a male character in a female body.

In conclusion, though *Elementary* is certainly not without its problems, it seems to be more aware than its predecessors of the fact that stereotypes are not only harmful, but quite frankly, lazy writing. *Sherlock* and the Warner Bros. films are much more difficult to call, as their representations of women are both problematic and progressive in very similar ways. It comes down to a question of which elements are more harmful than others, and that can quickly become complicated and subjective. Without being able to go into detail about subtler nuances and intersectional issues, it's probably best to call these two a tie for second place. One point of contention against feminist media criticism is that it viciously attacks writers and their creative work, but this is certainly not the intention of feminist critics, and certainly not the intention of this paper. The idea is to provide constructive criticism and to encourage awareness of the underlying messages the media is sending. There is nothing inherently wrong with enjoying problematic media; the issue arises when problematic media is excused because of enjoyment, and when potentially harmful messages are devoured and internalized without a second thought. To ensure awareness of the ideas one is fed by the media, one must be like Holmes himself and not only see, but observe.

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