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ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE
AND THE MEANING
OF MASCULINITY

DIANA BARSHAM

Arthur Conan Doyle and the Meaning of Masculinity

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Ashgate

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The Nineteenth Century General Editors' Preface

The aim of this series is to reflect, develop and extend the great burgeoning of interest in the nineteenth century that has been an inevitable feature of recent decades, as that former epoch has come more sharply into focus as a locus for our understanding not only of the past but of the contours of our modernity. Though it is dedicated principally to the publication of original monographs and symposia in literature, history, cultural analysis, and associated fields, there will be a salient role for reprints of significant texts from, or about, the period. Our overarching policy is to address the spectrum of nineteenth-century studies without exception, achieving the widest scope in chronology, approach and range of concern. This, we believe, distinguishes our project from comparable ones, and means, for example, that in the relevant areas of scholarship we both recognize and cut innovatively across such parameters as those suggested by the designations 'Romantic' and 'Victorian'. We welcome new ideas, while valuing tradition. It is hoped that the world which predates yet so forcibly predicts and engages our own will emerge in parts, as a whole, and in the lively currents of debate and change that are so manifest an aspect of its intellectual, artistic and social landscape.

Vincent Newey
Joanne Shattock

University of Leicester

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2000

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Introduction

As an exponent of the late-Victorian adventure culture which served to fashion the masculinities of the British Empire between 1880 and 1920, Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930) structured his own life to embody the chivalric, comedic and competitive manhood that was the subject of all his writing. His career was an attempt to promote the profession of letters as a definitively masculine pursuit, one that combined literature with an active engagement in those fields of public endeavour – medical, legal, military, political and religious – which would situate his name among the larger inscriptions of nation and empire. It was the career of someone who, in the heroic iconography of the time, wanted to be seen as ‘a great man’ but who was, at the same time, pathologically afraid of the attributes of genius and subversively opposed to the politics of greatness. His writing, whether as fiction, history or propaganda, taught the attributes of self-effacing leadership to a reading public not, by and large, born to lead. Doyle’s autobiography, *Memories and Adventures* (1924, 1930), provided a model of the masculine life – one based on his extensive and critically articulate study of life-writing genres. As a follower and defender of Thomas Carlyle, he was fascinated by those genres through which the cultural meaning of masculinity was expounded and commodified.

Doyle’s version of authorship derived from the orthodoxies and writing contexts of his Edinburgh upbringing. The masculine *écriture* of Victorian Scotland was one that developed in association with the Cheap Literature Movement vigorously promoted by the Edinburgh publishers, Robert and William Chambers. In imitation of their success, Doyle’s writing career carried an ambitious project: that of modernizing and strengthening the representation of British manhood to match the directives of more secular, scientific and empire-conscious culture. This task involved the reworking of archetypal configurations. Doyle recast the dominant masculine archetypes – of the warrior, the lover, the king-father and the priest-magician¹ – in the serial heroes of his short fiction: Brigadier Gerard, Professor Challenger and, above all, Sherlock Holmes. As the priest-magician, Sherlock Holmes was Doyle’s most inspired diagnostician of breaches and vulnerabilities in the modern domain of the masculine sign. 221B Baker Street became a magical site at which deformed, anxious and estranged masculinities encountered the corrective resymbolizations of a manhood predicated on an advanced and intelligent control of language codes.

Masculinity is represented in Doyle's writing as a bifurcated concept, as both a pathology and an order, a set of ludic rules which could be copied, learned and publicly performed, and a problematic essentialism activated and defined by its relationship to written and spoken language. For this reason, the archetype of the clown, magician, priest and healer is the dominant one of Doyle's career, configuring a transgressible border between essence and construct, predatory animal and performative spirit. The figure of the magician appears, too, as a transformer of stories on the interface between autobiography and fiction. In the most important friendships of Doyle's life, those with Dr George Turnavine Budd and later with the escapologist 'Houdini', the magician-figure mediates and exchanges the representation of self and other.

For Doyle the meaning of masculinity was located in the writing practices and ideological interpolations which compelled masculine bodies to respect the privileged laws of their own representation. As the prescribed reading of a British boyhood, Doyle's writing imprints on its readership powerful expectations of ethical conduct that are closely allied to the language codes of the Holmes stories. Formulaic and entrapping, the comedic apparatus of Doyle's fiction is, in Foucault's terms, a literary panopticon, 'a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it'. Doyle's readers, like the prison inmates of *Discipline and Punish*, are 'caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers'.²

The masculine sign-surveillance of Doyle's writing, however, is under the eye of the 'Comic Spirit' and owes more to the comedic theories of his literary mentor, George Meredith, than to nineteenth-century prison technology. Adopting Meredith's approach to the policing of masculine interiority, Doyle saw comedic surveillance as a distinctively British form of ideological control and cultural supremacy.³ Where Sigmund Freud, a conscious imitator of the Holmesian diagnostic method,⁴ saw a puzzling attribute of the super-ego in humour,⁵ Doyle identified it as one of the fundamental qualities of the spirit. For him, humour was a sign of spiritual survival, flowing through the discontinuities of the death experience and reconnecting the broken threads of individual identity with the same persistence that the British army in Afghanistan, Sudan and South Africa recovered from its recurrent defeats. Sherlock Holmes in particular was designed to associate Meredithian notions of the Comic Spirit with the new theories of genius postulated by Doyle's admired colleague in the field of psychic research, F. W. H. Myers. According to Myers, 'the subliminal personality' operating at 'supraliminal' levels produced 'a surviving self', a core of identity relatively unchallenged by death.⁶

While Holmes and Watson offer the reassurances of a moral order within the very structures of the English language, they do so in the name of a manhood which requires a relentless policing of its own criminal shadows. Fantasies of the concealed and invisible self and its covert activities are everywhere the subject of Holmes's deciphering panopticon. Significantly, Holmes uses his own experience of narcotic trance to mirror and penetrate the fantasies of his opponents and to prohibit the kind of interiority that believes itself free of surveillance. Written from the edges of a taboo articulation, the Holmes stories excite, not just by their deductive reasoning, but by their teasing suggestion of alternative and more *outré* disclosures. As part of their unofficial policing of British manhood, they ingeniously silence the articulation of the forbidden materials of masculine fantasy. They find comedic devices to trope the emotional and sexual repressions and indiscretions of a morally responsible masculine code. Animals – especially dogs or the notoriously sibilant swamp adder in *The Speckled Band* – are used as criminal scapegoats for the repressed material of stories in which, to decipher this famously enigmatic title, to speak all is banned.

It is, above all, the presence of Dr Watson, the literary emblem of an unimaginative decency, which controls and guarantees this continual suppression. As the normative, unexceptional Englishman, Watson understands lust, greed, addiction and gambling, but the more intricately perverse forms of criminal subjectivity are beyond his range. Where Doyle himself collected details of sexual perversion, the unEnglish vices of the Holmes stories invariably have dog kennels drawn decently in front of them. In the very last Holmes story, 'The Adventure of the Retired Colourman' from *The Case Book of Sherlock Holmes* (1927) a miserly and impotent old painter turns his strongroom into a gas chamber to provide the final solution for his unfaithful wife and her chess-playing lover. Attempting to explain such vengeful fantasies to a puzzled Watson, Holmes attributes to the murderer the mindset of a 'medieval Italian' rather than that of a 'modern Briton'.⁷ As the icons of a distinctively British masculinity, Holmes and Watson stand for the surveillance and suppression of the kind of male interiorities graphically catalogued by Klaus Theweleit in his study of Nazi masculinity, *Male Fantasy* (1989).

Germany and Austro-German culture became, for Doyle, the murderous other of his writing about British manhood, and also a covert part of its meaning. Austria, where he himself was partly educated, is represented in his autobiography as a place of satisfied hungers and disproportionately large instruments. His only 'memory' of his year in Feldkirch is of having his bed linen stuffed up his Bombardon by his fellow students.⁸ Sherlock Holmes of course has, as he reminds his

German counterpart, the spymaster Von Bork in *His Last Bow*, 'done a good deal of business in Germany' since his first European triumph of separating Irene Adler from the King of Bohemia.⁹ In the final collection of Holmes stories, *The Case Book of Sherlock Holmes*, Watson's 'case-book' itself is matched and mirrored by the 'lust-diary' of the Austrian wife-murderer, Baron Adelbert Gruner.

Holmes is himself, in many ways, a totemic figure of the kind of male fantasy detailed by Theweleit. His unemotional repudiation of women, his subjection of what Theweleit calls 'the whole desiring production of the unconscious' to repression and, above all, the massive egotism and sense of limitless power which accompanies his erasure of human parentage all conform to the fascist pattern.¹⁰ Placed in the writing context of John H. Watson, however, the sadistic fantasy components of Holmes are refathered and subject to the symbolizations of a covert Christian schema which reinscribes manliness as a desirable presence. Holmes and Watson detect the masculine absences of their culture, supply the deficiencies of the patriarchal father and control the signification of an unacceptable fantasy whose exposure threatens the status of manhood. Specifically, the Holmes stories utilize a private and playful language by which Doyle covertly encodes autobiographical impulses of his own.

The role of Holmes in Doyle's own life involves a similar surveillance, a strict control of fantasy through a formulaic repetition of the father-son relationship. In repeated acts of self-invention, Doyle moved steadily, throughout his career, closer to the centre of an English culture whose masculine models he, like the Scottish biographer, James Boswell, felt compelled to refashion. Through their double language of private reference, the Holmes stories act to affirm Doyle's links with his paternal grandfather, the Irish political cartoonist, John Doyle. They also act as a talisman against more treacherous and more dangerous affiliations. Holmes is the guarantor of Doyle's remarkable creation of himself, in the face of many counter-impulses, as the embodiment of a composite 'British' manhood whose private history exists in subversive graffiti beneath its dominant modes of representation.

Doyle's version of what Graham Dawson, in his now well-known study *Soldier Heros* (1994), has collectively labelled 'Empire-Man', does not altogether conform to the stereotypical figure that cultural histories of Victorian masculinity have increasingly tended to invoke. British imperialism for Doyle involved complex negotiations with his own most troubled sources of identity, his religious beliefs, the Irish nationalism of his father, Charles Altamonte Doyle, and his own deep identification with Scotland. His autobiography, *Memories and Adventures*, offers the conflicted history of the United Kingdom as a distinctive geography, the 'landscape for a good man' whose prosopopeia configured

the nation itself. The varied genres of Doyle's writing self-consciously inform this topography: his historical fiction is a construct of his own attempt at Englishness, the authority of his war correspondence and military history is Scottish in affiliation, while his Spiritualism attempts to locate itself in the lost poetry of Wales. The mainstay of his career, however, remained the Anglo-Irish partnership of Holmes and Watson.

Doyle's life was wide-ranging in its literary productions and increasingly combative in its commitments. Noisy causes attracted him. He was as willing to investigate poltergeist phenomena as he was to fight legal campaigns against miscarriages of justice or to write instant histories of the British at war. This broad and public-spirited approach concealed what might be considered a literary failure – his refusal to challenge the silencing censorship of Holmes or to engage in the direct representation of politically controversial issues. Taboo areas of discourse are configured in Doyle's fiction as a recurrent landscape of bog and mire, whose treacherously sinking surface only dogs and spirits could cross in safety. Consequently, while he has often been acknowledged for his seminal contribution to the detective story, the rest of his work has received relatively little critical attention. Nonetheless, it remains a varied and interesting *oeuvre*, one shaped by his preoccupation with the national determinants of masculinity and the uncertain face and mission of British imperialism.

Inheriting a nineteenth-century mythology derived largely from Carlyle and Macaulay which equated Protestant manhood with a privileged version of truthfulness, Doyle's literary career was informed by his compulsive interest in 'truth-genres', especially those of history, biography, journal, oral witness, legal testimony and scientific case-study. A Catholic by birth, he taught himself the accents of English Protestantism by inscribing truthfulness as a framing device in his representations of masculinity. For Doyle, however, whose propaganda for the British cause during the Boer War earned him a knighthood, the domain of truth, like that of the Empire itself, was mapped and troped as an improved and memorable versionality, whose boldness of outline could exonerate potentially de-authenticating inconsistencies within. His model of manhood was a similar one but in 1916, acknowledging the exclusions of that broad outline, he decisively broke the mould.

Whether learning to read or wrestling with addiction, facing the fear of battle or the threat of the uncanny, Doyle consistently defined masculinity, whether in men or women, as the courageous encounter with a potentially annihilating otherness. It was an encounter with which he became personally familiar following his controversial and often ridiculed conversion to Spiritualism in 1916. Hoping for recognition as a serious military historian following his six-volume history of the First

World War, he became known instead by the apparently irreconcilable polarities of his career: his creation of Sherlock Holmes on the one hand, and his support for the seance on the other. These stark polarities collapse once the inner history of his writing is read in its entirety. Just as Holmes was a reassuring prophylactic against the dangerous lures of Theosophy and the secret societies it fostered, so Spiritualism was a prophetic intelligence device, a preventive against cultural collapse and a continuation of propaganda by other means.

Doyle's Spiritualism and his Sherlock Holmes stories are dialogic in their mutual fascination with cryptic writing ciphers and the secret intelligence codes of the alphabet. The opposition they invoke is not one between reason and irrationality; instead, it is located in their incompatible cultures with regard to naming and identification. Himself a celebrated name, Holmes's function is that of correctly identifying problematic bodies. The spirits, on the other hand, revel in their freedom from sign, whether verbal or physical, and their insistent rejection of public identity. Skilled in the reconstruction of missing letters, Doyle also found in Spiritualism the occluded body of Victorian medical science and an antidote to the poisonous silences of his own past. After the execution of his friend and colleague, Roger Casement, whom he had already inscribed as the hero of his novel, *The Lost World*, Doyle came to believe that his own writing was itself a haunted site, not just a burial ground of desperate gambles and corpse-like configurations but a necrophilic art of safe bets and accurate predictions.

Despite the relative neglect of his work, Doyle's life story has been the subject of repeated biographical and fictional reconstructions. As recent biographies of him continue to testify, his version of the adventurous manly life retains considerable nostalgic appeal. *Memories and Adventures*, significantly written in the early 1920s at the height of his Spiritualist mission, is the anchoring text for these admiring biographies. This anchor is a deceptive one, encrypting the political nature of Doyle's engagement with Christianity and Christian Spiritualism during the last phase of his life. In his book, *The Sinews of the Spirit* (1985) Norman Vance has traced a progressive decline in the ideal of Christian manliness from the mid- to the late nineteenth century and the eventual 'unmanning of manliness' during the First World War: 'What was left of Christian manliness', Vance claims, 'was desperately wounded in the trenches.'¹¹ Kaja Silverman, in her seminal study *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (1992), has reiterated Theodor Reik's contention that Christianity as a religion represents 'the utter negation of all phallic values', arguing further that Christianity is intrinsically incompatible with the pretensions of masculinity.¹²

Christian Spiritualism, however, appears to be something of an exception to these theoretical rulings, replacing 'phallic values' of mastery and domination with a more explorative ethic of continuity and responsible development. The construction of masculinity in these terms was particularly significant for those sectors of society without a major investment in the institutions of state power or the ideological strategies of the English public schools. The movement at whose head Doyle placed himself had a strong and coherent appeal for many articulate and intelligent members of an increasingly educated working class, from the Chartist poet, Gerald Massey to the socialist editor, Robert Blatchford. The testimonials of obscure but impressively self-educated artisans like the Coventry ribbon weaver, Joseph Gutteridge, illustrate the importance of Christian Spiritualism in sustaining notions of manhood through the deprivations of a working life spent under what Gutteridge, in his autobiography, calls 'the blighting influence of the dark shadows of Materialism' and its 'philosophy of non-responsibility'.¹³ According to Gutteridge, who made Stradivarius violins in his spare time, it was 'the investigation of spiritual phenomena, guided by works that were within the means of a working man' that enabled him to reaffirm his manhood and 'emerge towards the sunlight of reason'.

Like the contestations of Doyle's own fiction, Spiritualism spoke directly to and from the inner man. Sceptically attending a seance in Bedworth, Gutteridge records how a spirit, writing through an entranced medium, suddenly announced itself as 'Satan'. The moment changed his awareness of himself:

With the bravado and self-consciousness characteristic of a youth with a smattering of science, I was bent on discovering and exposing imposture, and said, 'You are just the chap I want.' ... I had not finished the sentence before I was apparently transported to the frigid zone; I felt like a statue of ice, every fibre in my body being frozen and rigid – a most horrible sensation. Fearlessly and defiantly exercising my will power, which had been momentarily paralysed by the suddenness of the occurrence, I freed myself from this uncanny condition. Another member of the party felt a similarly chilling influence.¹⁴

Just as Gutteridge went on to become a convert, so, for Doyle, Spiritualism was the culmination of a literary career devoted to the language of masculinity and its lifelong demonization of the inner being.

While *Memories and Adventures* outlines a model life, it is a model which now rings hollow with the repetitions of biographers content to redeploy Doyle's own self-epistemology while ignoring the Spiritualist context within which it was written. In trying to restore some of the missing contexts of Doyle's writing career, I have also tried to read some of the silences of his own life story, deconstructing his own fiction

where necessary to supply the inner texts of a very public man. A post-modern or post-structural art of biography still needs to be formulated and, in writing this book, I have been conscious of such a theoretical lack. Following recent scholars of Romanticism such as Mary Jacobus and Jerome Christensen, I have tried to dissolve 'the protective divisions between persons and texts'¹⁵ in an attempt to explore the tortured and sometimes hilarious tensions between the inner and the outer man joined together in the name of Arthur Conan Doyle.

There is no excuse for writing a dull book on Doyle. As his work is known and valued by a wide community of readers outside academia, I have tried as far as possible to balance the often contradictory requirements of gender theory, cultural history, literary criticism and readability. While each chapter has a distinct focus organized according to the different genres of Doyle's writing, there is an orchestration between them in which Holmes has to take his place as the subliminal and surviving centre of the diverse and sometimes diffuse strands of Doyle's writing identity.

Notes

1. See Moore, R. and Gillette, D., *King, Warrior, Magician, Lover: Rediscovering the Archetypes of The Mature Masculine*, New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991.
2. Foucault, M., *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1991, p. 201.
3. See Meredith, G., 'An Essay on Comedy', in W. Sypher, *Comedy*, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956, and also Meredith, G., *Prelude to The Egoist*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968.
4. See Shepherd, M., *Sherlock Holmes and the Case of Dr Freud*, London and New York: Tavistock Publications, 1985.
5. Freud writes: 'If it is really the super-ego which speaks such kindly words of comfort to the intimidated ego, this will teach us that we have still a great deal to learn about the nature of the super-ego': Freud, S., 'Humour' in *Art and Literature*, The Penguin Freud Library, vol. 14, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1990, p. 443.
6. Myers, F. W. H., *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death*, vol. 1, Cambridge: Longmans, Green and Co., 1903, p. 73.
7. Doyle, A. C., 'The Adventure of The Retired Colourman', in *The Penguin Complete Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981, p. 1120.
8. See Doyle, A. C., *Memories and Adventures*, London: John Murray, 1930, pp. 24-5.
9. Doyle, A. C., 'His Last Bow', in *The Penguin Complete Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, p. 979.
10. Theweleit, K., *Male Fantasies*, vol. 2, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989, p. 241.

11. Vance, N., *The Sinews of the Spirit: The Ideal of Christian Manliness in Victorian Literature and Religious Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 201.
12. Silverman, K., *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, London: Routledge, 1992, pp. 196–8.
13. Gutteridge, J., *Lights and Shadows in the Life of an Artisan*, Coventry: Curtis and Beamish, 1893, p. 275.
14. Ibid., p. 132.
15. Chase, C. (ed.), *Romanticism*, London and New York: Longman, 1993, p. 114.

CHAPTER ONE

Model with Damaged Eyes: Autobiographical Writings

‘Was it for this the clay grew tall?’

Wilfred Owen, ‘Futility’ (1918)

Representing masculinity

This book is *not* a biography of Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930), but it is impossible to engage in any discussion of Doyle’s career without acknowledging the biographical frames within which his writing was situated. He planned for himself a life of public meaning, and biography is his literary element. His favourite reading consisted of work in this genre – the innumerable biographies, autobiographies, memoirs and diaries whose literary accents he could replicate and parody with such ease and humour. His own diverse writings constitute a body of work in search of its own autobiographer.

While Sherlock Holmes and his half-infatuated, half-infuriated biographer, Dr Watson, have retained their place in our culture, studies of other aspects of Doyle’s career have been relatively rare. His significance has been located less in his fiction or war histories than in his life story. A popular subject for repeated biographies, Doyle has also existed as a quasi-fictional character in a number of novels, plays and films devoted to some of the more controversial aspects of his life. These include his war writing, his legal campaigning, his willing suspension of disbelief in fairies and his resolute championship of the spirit world. His high-profile stance on these issues has enabled reconstruction of him as a post-modern literary hybrid, a figure who crosses and reconstitutes the boundaries of fictional representation.

Although this book is not a biography of Doyle, it does offer a reading of his career which emphasizes his engagement with Victorian biographical debate. It also addresses the main controversies of recent biographical scholarship. These controversies have been listed by Jon Lellenberg in *The Quest for Sir Arthur Conan Doyle: Thirteen Biographers in Search of a Life* as influential in shaping and preserving Doyle’s uncertain literary reputation. The ambiguity surrounding him derives from his high status as an icon of British masculinity compared to the

more modest placing of his literary achievements. His version of authorship was socially engaged and combative, his task as much the social performance of masculinity as the production of texts. A 1907 review of Doyle describes him as having established the profession of letters on a footing equivalent to that of law, medicine or banking

He is a publicist, he is a philosopher, he is a man of affairs, he is a combatant in the political arena, and he is a philanthropist ... In a way, he may be taken as the John Bull of Letters, with all the virtues and many of the limitations of that traditional and composite personality.¹

Doyle himself considered that the popularity of the Sherlock Holmes stories had been detrimental to his reputation as a serious writer.

Jon Lellenberg has identified five recurrent problems for the biographer of Doyle, three of them relating to his literary persona. What, he asks, was the 'real mind' of the man behind works whose reassuring propaganda on behalf of British manhood was their most influential quality? How can his intelligence and achievement be assessed? On the one hand, Doyle once claimed, in a piece of bravura rhetoric, to be simply 'the man in the street',² a Briton of representative ordinariness who could (and did) use the pseudonym 'Smith' to represent himself. On the other hand, Doyle was famous as the creator of the mastermind, Sherlock Holmes, and of the ingenious detective puzzles it was his function to decipher. A third line of argument again follows Doyle's own self-description, presenting him as not the creator of Sherlock Holmes, but merely as the copier of a brilliant original, replicating the detective methods of his Edinburgh medical professor, Dr Joseph Bell. Holmes, in Doyle's account, was a figure of composite masculine achievement, as reliant on the famous illustrations of Sidney Paget as on his real-life model, Dr Bell.

The penultimate and most intractable problem, according to Lellenberg, concerns Doyle's Spiritualist crusade. The issue here is one of masculine definition and a perception that his Spiritualism undermines that identification with post-Enlightenment reason used to guarantee the masculinity of the Holmes stories. 'Real men' like Doyle simply do not – or at least should not publicly – believe in spirits. Harry Houdini, Doyle's friend and opponent on this issue in the early 1920s, took a more appropriate public stance, using his own tricks to expose as fraudulent any medium claiming contact with the spirit world.

By the late nineteenth century, biography had become established as the main literary forum for the public configuration of an idealized manhood. As Dr Watson repeatedly illustrated, the male biographer and his subject combined to produce a work which sustained the transmission of a culturally produced masculinity while rewriting the life-text