

From Hero and Zero to Butch and Sundance:



On the Evolution of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson Throughout a Century of Adaptation

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Contents

Contents.....	2
General Note.....	3
Introduction: Timeless Holmes.....	4
Chapter 1: Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock: The One and Only.....	7
Chapter 2: Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce: Holmes the Nazi-hunter and Watson the Fool.....	18
Chapter 3: Jeremy Brett and David Burke/Edward Hardwicke: Depression and Friendship.....	29
Chapter 4: Downey Jr. and Cumberbatch: 21 st Century Sherlocks.....	37
4.1: Robert Downey Jr. and Jude Law's Holmes and Watson as Action Heroes in Ritchie's <i>Sherlock Holmes</i>	38
4.2: Benedict Cumberbatch as a Text-messaging Holmes in BBC's <i>Sherlock</i>	47
Conclusion: From (Super)hero and Inferior Sidekick to Modern Anti-hero and Valuable Friend.....	57
Works Cited.....	59
Works Consulted.....	62
List of Figures.....	63

General Note

Citations from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle are taken from *The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes*. Ed.

Leslie S. Klinger. 3 vols. London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006. Citations from Klinger refer to annotations and/or introductory passages/chapters from the same work.

Introduction: Timeless Holmes

More than a hundred years after the public's first acquaintance with Sherlock Holmes (in *A Study in Scarlet*, 1887), “[h]undreds of actors have portrayed Holmes on stage, radio, and screen, in his own milieu and in contemporary – even imaginary – settings” (Klinger 1:xvii). In fact, “[i]t is plausibly said that Sherlock Holmes has appeared in more films, and been represented by more actors, than any other character” (Redmond 232). One could say that Sherlock is everywhere, because not only is Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's creation represented in adaptations of his detective stories, he is also indirectly present in many other films and television series. Most obviously, Doyle's influence can be found in such detective duos as Morse and Lewis, but the popular medical series *House M.D.* is notoriously based on Holmes as well: its protagonist is a grumpy, arrogant head of a medical team who has *one* friend (Dr. Wilson), the same deductive approach as Holmes, is addicted (to Vicodin) and lives at number 221B (“House and Holmes”). The countless adaptations and appropriations lead many to ask: what is it about these stories that makes Sherlock Holmes so apparently timeless?

This thesis aims to answer this question, by looking at several works (in chronological order). The first chapter will focus on the original stories by Conan Doyle, the second on the 1940's films featuring Basil Rathbone (allegedly, *the* screen-Holmes), the third chapter on the late 80's/early 90's series and television-films starring Jeremy Brett (allegedly, *the* small-screen Holmes) and chapter four will discuss two of the latest adaptations: 2009's film *Sherlock Holmes*, by director Guy Ritchie, and the 2010 BBC-series *Sherlock*, starring Benedict Cumberbatch. While looking at these works in this order, one will inevitably note great differences. There is, however, a continuity to the Holmes stories in that each adaptation contains certain constants, elements from Doyle that continually appear in reinterpretations and re-imaginings throughout the years. These constants, this thesis will argue, consist of two main aspects: the portrayal of Sherlock Holmes as a

hero, and the relationship between Holmes and Dr. John Watson.

Because they are the constants that are discernible throughout these adaptations, from the 1940's to ten years into the 21st century, one can argue that these are the elements that make Doyle's stories timeless. Interestingly, however, the depiction of these timeless themes is influenced by the time in which they are adapted, regardless of the time in which the adaptation's narrative is set. For example, in all works (including Conan Doyle), there are parallels between Sherlock and what constitutes a hero or even superhero in any given period. Sherlock as (super)hero, as good fighting evil, is thus the timeless element. However, there is a change in this representation as time progresses, as do society's ideas on heroism: Sherlock is increasingly portrayed as a so-called "modern hero" who has a human side that is visible through vulnerabilities and weaknesses. These weaknesses were always there, and represent the multitude of layers Doyle's character possesses: these layers give creators a range of options to choose from or to emphasize. As the adaptations succeed each other, the weaknesses are chosen more often as points of focus and Sherlock is consequently portrayed as, consecutively, a (super)hero, a modern hero or an anti-hero.

Similarly, the relationship between Holmes and Watson differs in interpretation as the decades go by. Increasingly, the friendship transforms from one based on difference, on superiority versus inferiority, to one of equality. This is connected to the attribution of weaknesses, or rather emphasis on weaknesses, on the part of Sherlock – this decreases the sense of superiority. Together with the higher estimation of Watson's value and capability in the later adaptations, this results in a more modern depiction of the friendship. Indications of the importance of Watson to Sherlock, and the strength of their friendship, were always present in Doyle, as were the weaknesses. Where earlier adaptations chose to focus on the aspect of Sherlock's superior intellect, others opted for another aspect from Doyle's range of options and emphasized Watson's importance.

These two main aspects, along with sub-topics such as the depiction of Sherlock's relationship with women and his arch-nemesis Moriarty, will be the focus of each chapter in this

thesis, which will, where possible, offer explanations for the portrayal of these aspects by connecting them to events and trends of the time in which these portrayals were created. The conclusion will offer a summary of the way Holmes' timeless aspects are in their own way influenced by time-bound ideas.

Throughout, this thesis will place itself in between discussions of Sherlock Holmes, adaptation of literature and the concept of heroism and archetype, with socio-historical elements continually in the background. The most important sources on these discussions consist of the *Sherlock Holmes Handbook* (2009) by Christopher Redmond (a noted "Sherlockian" scholar), which discusses not only the original stories but also their Victorian background, their lasting influence and several adaptations; one of David Stuart Davies' many works on screen-adaptations of Holmes, *Starring Sherlock Holmes* (2007), which chronicles practically every Holmes-adaptation in film and television; two works edited by Angela Ndalians, associate professor in Cinema and Entertainment Studies at the University of Melbourne, which discuss the concept of (super)heroism, chiefly in comic books but also in other media: *The Contemporary Comic Books Superhero* (2009) and *Super/heroes: From Hercules to Superman* (2007). From the latter, a chapter by Peter Coogan ("The Definition of the Superhero") will be especially useful.

Chapter 1

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock: The One and Only

Before discussing what and how the adaptations of Sherlock Holmes adapt, it first needs to be pinpointed what the original stories actually consist of (and in how far, considering the number of adaptations even a century later, these stories can be seen as timeless). When Sir Arthur Conan Doyle had invented Sherlock Holmes, and much throughout his career, he did not seem to know the worth of what he had created. Mark Gatiss, who co-wrote the 2010 BBC-series *Sherlock* with Steven Moffat, states that Conan Doyle was “disparaging” about his creation, that he “did not know what he had got” (“Mark Gatiss on 'Sherlock'”, 00:01:52). Gatiss refers here to such remarks as “I have had such an overdose of [Sherlock] that I feel towards him as I do towards *paté de foie gras*, of which I once ate too much” (Doyle 1:xxxiii). This first chapter will examine what, exactly, Conan Doyle had got that would be loved by so many and deemed adaptable so often. To determine if there are specific elements to the stories that are especially adaptable, the chapter will then look again at both the plot-elements and the characters to see if these were created by Doyle to be specifically timeless.

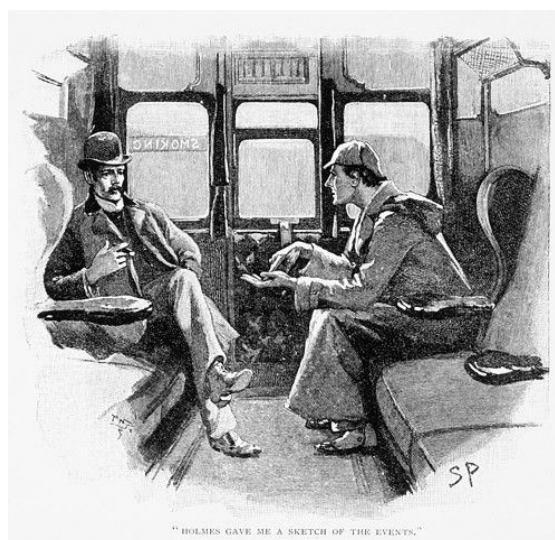


Figure 1.1: An illustration by Sidney Paget accompanying Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's “Silver Blaze” in Strand Magazine (1892). Paget's illustrations have become indissolubly connected to the Holmes stories. The deerstalker hat pictured is never described in Doyle, but Paget's addition has become (in)famous.

When Watson first meets Sherlock Holmes at the beginning of *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), the tone of almost every Holmes-story is set as the master detective baffles Watson with numerous deductions about him, based on a single glance. This is also the first of many things that may well be the cause for Holmes' popularity: unlike in previous stories featuring detectives, such as Edgar Allan Poe's Dupin, Charles Dickens' Inspector Bucket or Wilkie Collins' Sergeant Cuff, Conan Doyle offers the reader a narrator in the form of Watson, who translates the reader's thoughts onto the page as they read, who asks their questions the moment they are invoked. Thoughts and questions, when Sherlock Holmes is involved, are plentiful.

Watson makes a few observations of his own in the first Holmes-novel and, in chapter two, draws up the following list of things he can say about his soon-to-be roommate and friend.

SHERLOCK HOLMES—HIS LIMITS

1. Knowledge of Literature.—Nil.
2. “ ” Philosophy.—Nil.
3. “ ” Astronomy.—Nil.
4. “ ” Politics.—Feeble.
5. “ ” Botany.—Variable. Well up in belladonna, opium, and poisons generally. Knows nothing of practical gardening.
6. “ ” Geology.—Practical, but limited. Tells at a glance different soils from each other. After walks has shown me splashes upon his trousers, and told me by their colour and consistence in what part of London he had received them.
7. “ ” Chemistry.—Profound.
8. “ ” Anatomy.—Accurate, but unsystematic.
9. “ ” Sensational Literature.—Immense. He appears to know every detail of every horror perpetrated in the century.

10. Plays the violin well.
11. Is an expert singlestick player, boxer, and swordsman.
12. Has a good practical knowledge of British law. (Doyle 3: 34-35)

Despite what Watson here calls Sherlock's "limits," there can be no doubt that the man is intelligent. His intelligence, however, comes paired with an eccentricity that turns Sherlock into a mystery, one that is yet to be solved after four novels and 56 short stories that themselves have mysteries as their main instigator.

Sherlock's powers of deduction are extraordinary, and verge on the unbelievable. In "The Reigate Squires," he makes no fewer than 23 deductions based on handwriting. His deductions contribute greatly to his method for detecting, which "seems to be to form a provisional theory based on the preliminary evidence and then to wait for time or further evidence to support or discredit his theory" (Klinger 1:108, note 19). His techniques were not necessarily new: Voltaire's character *Zadig* (*Zadig Memnon*, 1747) can be seen "to observe things closely and – rather like Holmes – draw conclusions from what he sees" (Klinger 3:205, note 266). Attention to detail, that is what makes for a Sherlockian way of detecting. As Holmes explains to Watson in *A Study in Scarlet*, "strange details, far from making the case more difficult, have [...] the effect of making it less so" (Doyle 3:117). One of the earliest academic essays written on Sherlock Holmes appeared in 1892, and is added as an appendix to *A Study in Scarlet* by Klinger. In it, Dr. Joseph Bell says that the genius of Sherlock Holmes (and Conan Doyle) is the effect he has on the reader:

[Conan Doyle] created a shrewd, quick-sighted, inquisitive man, half doctor, half virtuoso, with plenty of spare time [...] and] makes him explain to the good Watson the trivial, or apparently trivial, links in his chain of evidence. These are at once so obvious, when explained, and so easy, once you know them, that the ingenuous reader at once feels, and says to himself, I also could do this; life is not so dull after all; I will keep my eyes open, and find out things. (quoted in Klinger 3:206)

Of course, Sherlock's reasoning only becomes obvious once it is explained, and as Sherlock often (or nearly always) postpones this moment of explanation until the end (telling Watson some of his deductions earlier on, but never the final solution), this can also lead to frustration. Doyle shows the official inspectors of the police and Scotland Yard to express some of this frustration. In *A Study in Scarlet*: “You have thrown out hints here, and hints there, and seem to know more than we do, but the time has come when we feel that we have a right to ask you straight how much you do know of the business,” inspector Gregson tells Holmes (Doyle 3:117-8). Lestrade follows with “You have remarked more than once since I have been in the room that you had all the evidence which you require. Surely you will not withhold it any longer?” (3:118). Still, Holmes' character defies the police's wishes: “This I expect very shortly to do. I have good hopes of managing it through my own arrangements” (3:118).

Sherlock's defiance is an example of his strange relationship with the police and Scotland Yard. Out of all the officers and policemen who show up in the novels and stories, Inspector Lestrade appears most often. In *A Study in Scarlet* Sherlock calls Lestrade and another inspector “the pick of a bad lot”, whereas in “The Boscombe Valley Mystery”, he describes Lestrade as an “imbecile” (Doyle 1:101). Klinger notes that it is not so much the inspectors themselves that Sherlock has issues with, however, but rather their methods. Lestrade himself also “frequently patronised Holmes's methods yet evidently bore a secret respect for Holmes” (Klinger 1:114, note 28). If he had voiced this respect, Sherlock would have loved it: in *The Valley of Fear*, Watson says that “[Holmes] was always warmed by genuine admiration” (Doyle 3:652). And considering how Sherlock stresses at several instances that he has failed only a few times (considering the number of cases) – for example in “The Five Orange Pips”, where he says he has “been beaten four times – three times by men, and once by a woman” (Doyle 1:137), expressions of admiration will have been welcomed frequently by the apparently slightly arrogant or even narcissistic consulting detective.

Sherlock's relationship with women is rather difficult. He was once beaten by a woman: this

woman is generally considered to be Irene Adler, who outdid Holmes in “A Scandal in Bohemia.” The story begins with Watson saying that “[t]o Sherlock Holmes she is always *the* woman” (3:5) and the allusions in the story to Holmes' being in love with Irene (his reward in the case is, at his own request, a photograph of Irene) are somewhat contradictory to previous expressions of Holmes about women. These expressions are not positive – in fact, Holmes' comments verge on the misogynistic. Take, for example, this statement in *The Sign of Four*: “Women are never to be entirely trusted – not the best of them” (3:311). A slightly less offensive statement is made by Sherlock in *The Valley of Fear*: “I am not a whole-souled admirer of womankind, as you are aware, Watson” (3:704). The lack of admiration is in fact more like an utter disinterest to which Irene Adler seems to be the only exception: after Mary Morstan, Watson's future wife, leaves 221b Baker Street, the following dialogue occurs: “What a very attractive woman! I [Watson] exclaimed, turning to my companion. [...] 'Is she?' he said languidly; 'I did not observe'” (3:235). Klinger notes that it is hard to believe that the usually observant Holmes failed to notice or acknowledge a woman's beauty (3:235, note 51).

Sherlock's disinterest in women has given rise to much speculation about his relationship with Watson. Sherlock's, in Watson's words, “aversion to women” (1:635) and the fact that he has no other friends (“Some friend of yours, perhaps?” [asks Watson.] 'Except yourself I have none,' he answered” 1:135) have caused scholars to speculate about the possibility of a romantic relationship between the two (see, for example, Larry Townsend's *The Sexual Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*). Generally, however, Holmes and Watson are considered to be good friends. The strength of this friendship is mostly subtextual and can be deduced from certain scenes, for example when Watson faints as Sherlock returns from the dead in “The Adventure of the Empty House.” Furthermore, the value of the story “The Adventure of the Devil's Foot,” in which Holmes affectionately uses the words “my Watson” (Doyle 3:1412), lies, according to Klinger, in “the revelation of the depth of the friendship between Sherlock Holmes and Watson” (2:1392): in it, Watson says that “I had never

seen so much of Holmes's heart before” (Doyle 2:1414). The tension between the two when Watson is soon to leave Sherlock for Mary Morstan is another sign of this depth. They do not speak of it, but the imminence of the changes to their lives is evident: “Both men must have realized it [Watson's leaving] was inevitable but preferred not to speak of it, let alone openly express their feelings about such a parting or the immense changes it would bring to both their lives” (Thomson quoted in Klinger, 1:318, note 50).

Despite the intimacy and strength of the friendship, Sherlock remains an unpredictable and inexplicable man to Watson. Sherlock often leaves Watson in the dark as to what his plans are, even as they are executing them and Watson for some reason goes along, even when it is illegal and involves throwing a smoke-rocket into someone's house (until he actually receives the rocket in “A Scandal in Bohemia”, Watson was only told to throw in an “object”). John Le Carré attributes the appeal and success of Sherlock to the fact that Watson is portrayed as almost mindlessly following Holmes. As a result, he says, the reader is “delightfully trapped between his two champions” in that “we shall never catch him [Sherlock] up” but “we are smarter by a mile than that plodding Dr. Watson!” (1:xiv). Poor plodding Watson, on a superficial level, is far inferior to Sherlock's genius. Ultimately, the reader knows that Watson is a good man, without whom Sherlock would not have been as successful (“Certainly Holmes without Watson is far different, far less comprehensible” (Redmond 47)). However, one cannot help but feel for him from time to time. Take, for example, this scene from *A Study in Scarlet*: “I confess,’ said I [Watson], ‘that I do not quite follow you.’ ‘I hardly expected that you would” (Doyle 3:197). There are also the occasions on which Holmes completely shuts Watson (and everything else) out, when “the outbursts of passionate energy when he performed the remarkable feats with which his name is associated were followed by reactions of lethargy, during which he would lie about with his violin and his books, hardly moving save from the sofa to the table” (Doyle 1:529). Domestic life with Sherlock Holmes must not have been easy, as he had many “queer humours” and was “one of the most untidy men” (Doyle 1:528). Despite his

untidiness, however, there are also instances where Watson, on whom Sherlock always relied, must (and can) in turn rely on his friend. This is especially evident in the way Sherlock apparently takes care of Watson's money: it is not mentioned often, but there is evidence in the canon that Watson has a gambling problem and that Sherlock helps him through it: “Your cheque book is locked in my drawer”, says Sherlock in “The Adventure of the Dancing Men” (2:865).

The mysterious aspects to the main character are most definitely part of what made the series successful, and Conan Doyle was conscious of the need for Sherlock to be noteworthy if his writings were to do well: “it struck me [Conan Doyle] that a single character running through the series, if it only engaged the attention of the reader, would bind the reader” (quoted in Harrington 369). It is noted in Ellen B. Harrington's article that by using this strategy, Conan Doyle turned Sherlock into “an effective brand.” William Cook agrees and quotes Gavin Collinson in “Holmes, Sweet Holmes”: “There's three things in life that are certain – death, taxes and more Sherlock Holmes movies. [...] He's now a brand, and as with any successful brand, people will always wish to exploit that” (31). The Sherlock Holmes brand thus “influences 'twentieth century fiction, film, radio, and especially television” (Harrington 369). This influence can be seen in more than 'just' the hundreds of adaptations of Conan Doyle's work: in the introduction to Leslie S. Klinger's *The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, John Le Carré writes that Holmes and Watson are “almost single-handedly responsible for the buddy-buddy movie. The modern thriller would have been lost without them. With no Sherlock Holmes, would I ever have invented George Smiley? And with no Dr. Watson, would I ever have given Smiley his sidekick Peter Guillam?” (1:xiv). Le Carré is alluding to the concept of archetype here, and suggests that Holmes and Watson have become archetypes for the detective and his sidekick, the sort of duo found in many television series (*Midsomer Murders*, the Dutch *Baantjer*) and films nowadays (but see Rolf J. Canton's *The Moriarty Principle* for the suggestion that Conan Doyle, in turn, used the archetypal duo as 'founded' in *Don Quixote*).

“[T]he term archetype denotes recurrent narrative designs, patterns of action, character-types, themes and images which are identifiable in a wide variety of works of literature”, explains *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (13). One could say, as Canton does, that “[a]rchetypes, some of which yield today's stereotypes, are the basis of characters in literature” (94). Many archetypes have originated in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's stories, including that combination of “the archetype of Holmes as the pure, cerebral thinker” (Canton 4) and the 'plodding' sidekick-archetype of Watson. Ellen Harrington's “Nation, Identity and the Fascination with Forensic Science in Sherlock Holmes and *CSP*” calls “an idiosyncratic male detective and a more normal, less brilliant sidekick” an “oft-emulated Holmesian model” (367). But “it's less known outside the Holmesian world that Moriarty, too, is an archetype – of satanic power” (Canton 4). Moriarty is Sherlock's arch-nemesis (and the cause of what seemed to be Holmes' death in “The Final Problem,” before the detective's return seven years later). He is the evil mastermind behind many of the crimes and mysteries investigated throughout the years, although he only appears in three stories (“The Final Problem”, “The Empty House” and *The Valley of Fear*). Many of today's villains are reminiscent of him: he is the Joker and the Lex Luthor of Conan Doyle's stories. This would of course make Sherlock into an archetypal superhero, into a Batman or Superman, whose genius and power is almost equalled by that of the arch-nemesis, but *eventually* prevails. The villain in the film *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, starring Sean Connery and based on a series of graphic novels, calls himself “M” but is later revealed to be Moriarty. The film features various famous literary characters (Captain Nemo, Tom Sawyer, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde), but out of all the villains literature has produced, the series and film choose Moriarty as their archetypal 'bad guy'.

But in what stories do these archetypes feature? Is the success of the detective series caused purely by its main characters? Considering Sherlock is still known and loved more than 100 years after his first story was published, one cannot help but think that there is something timeless about

the concept. In fact, however, many of the stories brought social and socio-political themes of the Victorian era to the fore. The very first story, the novel *A Study in Scarlet* (in which Watson and the reader meet Sherlock Holmes), provides an account of the history of the Mormons in America. Through this, Conan Doyle's narrative "reflects Victorian England's distorted views of the Mormons and their history in the American West" (Klinger 3:5). In the next novel, one can find "the subject of English colonialism and its impact on the Victorian world" (3:211), as *The Sign of Four* features a character called Tonga, "a little black man" and an "Islander", who is shot after having murdered a man with a poisonous dart while helping the white Jonathan Small to steal treasure. And in the last novel, *The Valley of Fear*, the history of the Molly Maguires is recounted, and the story "takes a critical view, as did most people at the time, of the Irish miners and the violence in which they purportedly engaged" (3:631). The same goes for the short stories: "The Crooked Man" "is rooted in the evils of the Indian Mutiny" (1:582); 1904's "The Adventure of the Golden Pince-Nez" refers to "nihilism and the terrors of the czarist police state" while "Russia and its recent violent history was much on the public's mind" (2:1092); "His Last Bow" is about "Holmes' undercover service in the Great War" (2:1424); "The Adventure of the Blanched Soldier" touches on the Boer War (for which Conan Doyle unsuccessfully volunteered (Klinger 2:1510)). There is also a more implicit influence of the Victorian age in the stories, however. Redmond's *Sherlock Holmes Handbook* provides two chapters on the Victorian background and the era's stance on crime and punishment, and connects these to Doyle's stories. A few examples: "Britons felt themselves superior in a cultural and moral sense, evident both in Holmes's amusement at his American clients and in the confidence with which British missionaries set out to civilize India and China" (140); when reading about Holmes "[i]t is useful [...] to understand the Victorian obsession with death" (164) as, for example, Jack the Ripper swept through London in 1888; in the Victorian era "there is a strong tradition of fairness and independence" (191).

The stories themselves, then, are not necessarily timeless. This is not to say that adaptations

cannot deal with historical events of the past, but it is certainly harder to appeal to an audience that does not have the topic on his or her mind. And a story like “The Adventure of the Three Gables”, in which Holmes's comments are “certainly racist by modern standards” (Klinger 2:1534), would seem well nigh impossible to adapt unless these comments are taken out and the story changed. There are, however, also universal and perhaps indeed timeless themes woven in throughout the canon, but these originate in the Victorian mindset and are thus timeless and time-bound at the same time. For example, Sherlock dislikes the upper class. He himself is “nearly classless” and “[h]is finances are similarly indeterminate” (Redmond 155), but considering he has to share an apartment to be able to afford it tells the reader he is not from this upper class. His dislike can be seen as a comment on the idea of social classes that may be less important today than in Victorian England but still concerns contemporary society. Money, too, featured in Conan Doyle then and in countless stories now: “The world of money has changed little in 100 years, and 'The Stock-Broker's Clerk' tells a thrilling tale of 'identity theft' that might be drawn from today's headlines” (Klinger 1:474). Furthermore, justice is a universal, timeless theme that is at the base of Doyle's creation. Considering Redmond's statement that the Victorians had “a strong tradition of fairness and independence” one might say that Holmes is a product of this tradition that is still appealing today. A detective “represents justice [...] or one might even say good in pursuit of evil” (206) – in this, Holmes is rather a hero. Then and now, one will see in Doyle's stories how the police “are certainly bumblers, and the reader rejoices at the idea of a powerful, incorruptible, almost superhuman figure bringing murderers to justice” (Redmond 319). This quote takes Holmes' heroism a step further by calling him a superhuman and alluding to the term superhero.

Ultimately, it seems that plot comes in the second place in Conan Doyle, after character – both are not timeless, but it is Sherlock, Watson, Lestrade and Moriarty that have effectively turned Sherlock into a brand, not the stories. The narratives serve mostly as supporting actors for the main characters. In Conan Doyle, Moriarty is a cunning, evil mastermind; Lestrade a humble policeman;

Watson a loyal friend and voice to the reader's thoughts; Sherlock a mysterious, seemingly mad yet brilliant thinker. It is these characters – Holmes and Watson especially, of course – and their relationships that many seem to agree upon as the 'spirit' of the Sherlock Holmes-stories. William Cook agrees, although he first notes that the stories are, really, “deathly dull”, “terribly short on drama” and involve “virtually no sex, not much violence, hardly any good strong female roles, and an awful lot of middle-aged men standing (or sitting) around talking” (31). “Yet,” he continues, “the films still grip you just as fiercely as the books, because the best movies aren't about action – they're about relationships” (31). If something is going to define itself as a Sherlock Holmes-adaptation, it is the spirit of those relationships it is required to capture. Because the canon is so extensive, each creator setting out to adapt Sherlock Holmes can pick and mix the details of these relationships and the traits of the characters who have them. As suggested above, however, these characters are not entirely timeless either. The following chapters will therefore discuss if and how the depiction of these characters changes in the process of adaptation.

Chapter 2

Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce: Holmes the Nazi-hunter and Watson the Fool

Basil Rathbone is by many considered to be *the* Sherlock Holmes, at least on film: Redmond calls him “the screen's most influential Holmes” (234), and Damian Magee thinks that “[w]hen you ask the general public about the actors who have portrayed Sherlock Holmes, nine out of ten will name Basil Rathbone” (“Part Five,” par. 1). This chapter discusses the films in which he features, which have become iconic and have influenced the view people have of Conan Doyle's character: the image of Holmes' silhouette, with a deerstalker hat, Inverness cape and pipe, comes from the films starring Rathbone, in which quotes now considered to be Holmes' (although they were, in fact, never uttered in Doyle) were used. Most famously, Rathbone tells Nigel Bruce, who played his 'sidekick' in most of the films: “Elementary, my dear Watson, elementary!” Rathbone is also the only actor to have portrayed Holmes in films set in the Victorian era as well as in films set in the '40's (some of them during the second World War). This chapter will firstly discuss the depiction of Holmes as an archetypal (super)hero typical of the time's mindset, focussing there on the films set during World War II, and secondly the change in the Holmes-Watson friendship compared to Conan Doyle.

The popularity and influence of the films starring Basil Rathbone are not due to their being the first adaptations of Sherlock Holmes. In fact, adaptations were made even as Doyle was still at work on his series (there are even some (stage-)adaptations that the author wrote himself: *The Speckled Band* in 1910 and *The Crown Diamond* in 1921). For a long time before Rathbone, it was William Gillette (who played in a 1899-stage adaptation *Sherlock Holmes*) who was seen as *the* embodiment of Conan Doyle's Holmes:

Gillette was accepted as being Sherlock Holmes in person, his stage interpretation

accounting for most of the still surviving popular image of the great detective. The suave but nervous movements, the quiet confident voice, the curved pipe and the pointed needle, these all came from Gillette as much as from the pages of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. But other Holmeses have intervened, chief among them being Basil Rathbone in the 1940's and Jeremy Brett in the [1980's – 90's] (Redmond quoted in Zecher, 9).

Even Conan Doyle himself called Gillette “the living image of Sherlock Holmes” (quoted in Redmond, 222). His reign would, however, as Redmond says, come to a halt as Basil Rathbone starts to “intervene”, even though, Zecher claims, Rathbone “merely acted in the style and used many of the nuances introduced by Gillette” (15).

The first film that combines Rathbone as Sherlock and Nigel Bruce as Watson in a “fortunate convergence of man and rôle” (Klinger 1:liv) is *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1939). As the title suggests, it follows Conan Doyle's novel of the same name. It is one of the two films, produced by Twentieth Century Fox, that is set in the original time-frame (Universal Pictures would produce twelve more films, but set them in contemporary times). The second film, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1939), “is only loosely based on anything Canonical” (Redmond 235) – its opening title claims it is based on the 1899 play starring Gillette, “but the final product bears little resemblance to it” (Davies 42). Surprisingly, setting the film in the Victorian age was “strikingly original” (Steinbrunner quoted in Redmond, 235) and more innovative than modernising the stories – presumably, a contemporary setting was less expensive, but would it not be easier to follow an existing plot, rather than having to re-invent it? Either way, it is perhaps because of this Victorian setting that the first two films are considered to be better than the other twelve, especially by so-called Sherlockians: “they are the two generally considered best, and certainly the two most faithful to Holmes's late-Victorian environment” (Redmond 235).

Perhaps due to their popularity, the exterior characteristics seen in the two early films have

become iconic. “The physical resemblance of Rathbone to the Sidney Paget illustrations was quite striking” (Redmond 237). While Paget followed Conan Doyle's descriptions fairly accurately, he influenced the greater public's opinion greatly by depicting him with a deerstalker hat several times – this image became definitive after Rathbone combined it with an Inverness cape and curved pipe in his films. The outfit seen in Paget's illustrations and the first two films with Rathbone have become part of a stereotypical depiction of Holmes, despite it being unwarranted by Doyle's descriptions of Holmes: while Paget and Rathbone's Holmes' are true to the physique (“In height he was rather over six feet [...] excessively lean [...] eyes were sharp and piercing [...] thin, hawk-like nose” (Doyle 3:29-30)), Doyle never describes Holmes as wearing either a deerstalker hat or an Inverness cape. Nevertheless, “it seems the general public’s acceptance went along with Rathbone’s and Bruce’s portrayals of the characters on the screen” (Magee, “Part Five” par. 3). After a while, even “[t]he names and identities of the actors had become [...] synonymous with those of the characters they were playing” (Davies 57).



Figure 2.1: Basil Rathbone with the now stereotypical deerstalker hat, Inverness cape, curved pipe and magnifying glass. In the middle is Ida Lupino as Ann Brandon, and to the right is Nigel Bruce as Doctor Watson. From The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes (1939).

The films also present an interpretation of Holmes' character traits, an interpretation that is largely in sync with the stories: “The energy and arrogance that Rathbone shows, at least in his finer

scenes, are certainly those of Holmes” (Davies 237-8). A scene in which Holmes tells a client that he shall “interfere whenever and wherever I like” (*The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* 00:30:00) captures precisely Holmes' arrogance and disregard for the law. Indeed, Holmes often “comports himself outside the law” (Redmond 41): in Doyle's “The Boscombe Valley Mystery,” for example, Holmes enables a man guilty of murder to go free, stressing before the culprit's confession that he is “no official agent” (Doyle 1:129). However, the murderer was blackmailed, did it for his daughter and is in poor health: Holmes values justice rather than law, which in this case means setting free a murderer. The portrayal of someone striving for justice, albeit by defying the law, will have been as welcome in 1939, at the onset of the war, as in the Victorian era. The films thus set Sherlock up as being the hero of justice he would become even more so in the World War II-films.

In *Sherlock Holmes and the Voice of Terror* (1942), Universal states in the opening titles that Sherlock Holmes is timeless, a statement the twelve films aim to prove by showing “a Holmes tackling 'problems of the present day” (Redmond 235). “A lot of Sherlockians will find them painful to watch” says Magee in 1997 of modern Holmes scholars (“Part Five,” par. 10), presumably because the plots of the '40's-films are “utterly non-canonical” (Klinger 1:291). Most claim to be based upon one of the short stories, however, and some do indeed borrow from those story lines: *Sherlock Holmes Faces Death* is based on “The Musgrave Ritual” and only changes, apart from the setting, the crown of Charles I into an old land-grant; *Sherlock Holmes and the Secret Weapon* takes the secret drawing-code from “The Dancing Men.” More importantly, it transports the characters to contemporary times. Thus we find Holmes and Watson battling German Nazi-spies (“You would take the Nazis' own car?” “One must adapt oneself to the tools at hand” (*The Secret Weapon*, 00:08:07-00:08:11)), including Professor Moriarty, in the first three Universal-films. Incidentally, these films were created by an American studio from 1942 – America's participation in the war started in December '41, after the attack on Pearl Harbour. In these World War II-films, Rathbone's Holmes still shows the same characteristics as in the two earlier films. His

exterior resemblance to Holmes actually improves in terms of fidelity to Doyle: the deerstalker hat and Inverness cape are exchanged for contemporary, more practical and realistic clothing. As far as the parallels to the archetypal superhero go, one could also argue that Holmes thereby loses his costume – but he still frequently disguises himself: in fact, his ability to disguise himself is only introduced *after* the two films set in the 1890's. *Sherlock Holmes and The Secret Weapon* shows Holmes as a German bookseller who removes his disguise in front of an unaware Watson (in Doyle's "The Adventure of the Empty House", Watson also fails to see that a bookseller is actually Holmes). Without the costume, there are plenty of parallels left: Holmes has Watson for a sidekick, his intellect as his superpower, and represents justice battling evil, sometimes in the form of an arch-nemesis.

In the Universal-films, the element of the villain that was also present in the original stories is used (and used well). Professor Moriarty is played by various actors throughout the series of films, but some (including George Zucco and Henry Daniell) managed to convey that "touch of the power of evil" that Conan Doyle's Moriarty possessed, and Daniell in particular "matches his Moriarty with great style against Rathbone's Holmes" (Magee "Part Five," par. 24). That Moriarty matches Holmes is a vital part of (the spirit of) the original stories. Scenes in which Holmes and Moriarty meet are filled with tension and are reminiscent of the equally tense meeting between the nemeses in Doyle's "The Final Problem." The film *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* had already portrayed the relationship and did so in a playful yet also tense manner of which the following dialogue is an example: "'You've a magnificent brain, Moriarty,' says Holmes, 'I admire it. I admire it so much, I'd like to present it pickled in alcohol to the London Medical Society.' 'It would make an impressive exhibit,' admits the Professor" (Davies 42). The arrogance of Moriarty is a good match for Holmes'.

The rivalry between Holmes and Moriarty is, in the World War II-films, also used for the incorporation of patriotic themes. For example, in *Sherlock Holmes and the Secret Weapon*, Holmes

says: “Moriarty, this is no simple crime that you contemplate. It is a staggering blow against your own country” (00:39:47-00:39:56). Betrayal of one's country by siding with Germany was and is portrayed as one of the highest forms of treason. Setting or following the heroic example of the time, Holmes would sacrifice himself for the greater purpose of defeating Germany: “Don't you realise what this means to England?” he is asked. “We not only lose the Tobel-bombsight ourselves, but Germany gets it”. Holmes answers with “Don't you suppose I realise that, Sir Reginald? Don't you suppose I'd give my life to decode the last name of that message?” (00:51:30-00:51:51).

Another example of the patriotic theme present in these World War II-films and the following Universal-films is their tradition of ending a Holmes-film with a patriotic quote. In the case of *The Secret Weapon*, Shakespeare's words are used for a final scene that is both patriotic and hopeful for the resolution of the War: “Things are looking up, Holmes. This little island is still on the map,” says Watson. “Yes. This fortress – built by Nature for herself. This blessed plot, this Earth, this realm, this England” (01:07:21-01:07:40).

Of course, in the end, Sherlock prevails, as good does over evil. It is thereby stressed even more that Holmes is, apart from the archetypal detective, also an archetypal hero (with Moriarty as his archetypal arch-nemesis). In 1942, when *Sherlock Holmes and the Voice of Terror* appeared, a hero such as he will have provided hope for viewers: “There was an enormous desire to see social justice, a rectifying of corruption,” says DC Comics president Paul Levitz. “Superman was a fulfillment of a pent-up passion for the heroic solution” (Poniewozik par. 2) and so will Holmes have been. A hero, says Angela Ndaliansis, “often reflects the social need for extraordinary action” (3).

While some objected to the appropriation of Holmes for propagandistic purposes in the war-time films, arguing it is too far removed from Doyle, Conan Doyle himself has in fact used his hero to comment (subjectively) on a contemporary conflict: Holmes was a propagandistic hero in 1917's “His Last Bow.” This story by Doyle speaks “not of crime but of international espionage, with

Holmes acting as a double agent on the eve of World War I” and has “undeniably been written as war propaganda” for which “readers in 1917 may have been grateful” (Redmond 33). The story is, according to Klinger, “echoed” in the 40's' Rathbone-films (2:1424) and shows how Doyle *himself* has placed Holmes in narratives many would find 'untypical' or 'non-Holmesian' – but they are not. After all, like the Universal-films starring Rathbone and Bruce, this work by Doyle himself has a heroic Holmes who represents the indeed timeless values that make up the spirit of his character: “strength, certainty, and pragmatic morality, timeless values which should ensure that he will continue to inform our culture in both obvious and subtle ways for some time to come” (Chapman quoted in Redmond, 318). While some wondered why “Universal should take such cheap advantage of the current crisis [the Second World War] to exploit an old, respected fiction character” (Crowther quoted in Davies, 45), the films do not attempt to make people forget Conan Doyle's creation and come up with a completely new character. On the contrary, Roy William Neill (the director of ten of the Universal films about Holmes, starting with *Sherlock Holmes and the Secret Weapon*) was “so keen [...] to maintain a fidelity to the character of Sherlock Holmes that for his earlier films he brought in [...] a 'technical expert' on Conan Doyle” (Davies 46). The Universal-films did sometimes succeed in showing a timeless Holmes: of *Dressed to Kill*, Pihonda wrote that “the modernisation of Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson is bearing fruit on screen” (Davies 70). More importantly, while most of Rathbone's Holmes-films may not have been set in Victorian London, he “inspired the audience to acts of heroism” (Davies 7), provided future generations with “a blueprint for its own Holmes, the next Holmes on the screen” (Magee “Part Five,” par. 31), and ensured an on-going interest in Conan Doyle's stories. This is enabled by the possibility of seeing Holmes stories as hero myths, and the fact that “hero myths contain universal elements and have a continued presence in cultural memory, yet they're dynamic beings who shift and metamorphose to accommodate themselves to specific eras” (Ndalianis 3). This statement applies to Holmes, who has been shifted and metamorphosed many a time over the years, and is explicitly adapted to

“accommodate” himself to the World War II-era.

Being a much-needed hero, and an example of good fighting evil, Holmes' eccentricity is downplayed in the films, especially the propagandistic WWII films. While certain eccentric traits are visible, for example in a scene where Sherlock attempts to find violin chords that will chase houseflies away, they serve mostly to provide a subtle comic relief. Otherwise, David Stuart Davies notes when discussing *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Rathbone “kept his interpretation under control,” displayed a “lack of smugness” and thereby “holds the characterisation within the bounds of reality,” “making the character credible rather than eccentric” (38). This changed somewhat for the worse in the following thirteen films, and Rathbone was criticised for his portrayal becoming “as pedestrian as a cop on patrol” (Davies 59) as he grew weary of the role. Nevertheless, his performance is considered the best part of the films. “This was a Holmes who was not only alert and intellectually superior, but a daring man of action also” says Davies (40) – at the end of *The Secret Weapon*, he uses words to trick Moriarty out of shooting him and a gun to lure the Professor into a trap. “These two halves of the character had never before been so evenly balanced on screen” (40). And if one is to portray Sherlock Holmes, the phrase “two halves of the character” is essential and part of the mystery of the great detective. It is also here that one can, once more, find parallels to the archetypal superhero as well as the archetypal hero.

There are heroes and superheroes, and while Holmes seems to apply for both there is a grey area between the two categories that perhaps suits the detective better. Like the superhero comic book-protagonist Hulk, who has two “opposing natures,” Holmes becomes a man of the oppositional intellect *and* action in the Universal-films. Furthermore, there are those elements (also present in the original stories) of the sidekick, the arch-nemesis and the extraordinary powers. Peter Coogan, in his “The Definition of a Superhero,” argues that “Sherlock Holmes is a detective, not a superhero” (21) despite his abilities. This, he explains, is because a hero must contain all the elements of a superhero to attain that “super” prefix. Sherlock, therefore, is 'merely' a hero because

he does not have a costume or a secret identity. Coogan is, however, referring to Doyle's Holmes here, not to the Holmes portrayed by Rathbone in the Universal-films. One could argue that Rathbone's character's use of disguises (costume) and his portrayal as a spy (secret identity) makes the term *superhero* applicable once again. Thus there are different possible interpretations of Holmes and the category in which he, as a protagonist, can be placed. As with the (super)heroes found in comic books, however, there is a multiplicity to his character that allows for readers to “consume multiple versions of the same franchise, each with different conceptions of the character, different understandings of their relationships with the secondary figures, different moral perspectives, exploring different moments in their lives, and so forth” (Jenkins 20-21). The interpretation of Holmes in the 40's contributes to this system of multiplicity that Jenkins says is part of the current comic book culture but that also applies to the Holmes myth.

Most criticism of the films is aimed at Nigel Bruce's Watson, whose portrayal of the hero's sidekick was anything but subtle. Sherlockians “may cringe at Bruce's Watson”, says Magee (“Part Five”, par. 6). This is because he is not at all like the Watson from the Canon, but is instead turned into a “decent but dunder-headed Watson” who continually makes “a fool of himself” and is “lagging hopelessly far behind the insight and energetic action displayed by Holmes” (Redmond 238). A good example of this foolish behaviour can be seen in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*: to help Holmes, Watson must lie down on the street on his stomach (where a victim was found). A man passes by and asks if he should find a doctor. This dialogue follows: “I'm a doctor. What's the matter with you?” [...] “But aren't you ill?” “Certainly not. I'm dead” (00:38:45-). In the scene, Bruce's body language (mouth agape, clumsy movement) emphasizes the use of Watson for jokes. Klinger even goes so far as to say that “Bruce's buffoonish portrait of Watson would shame the memory of the 'trustworthy comrade' and 'man of action', as the real Holmes characterized him” (1:liv). Indeed, it becomes understandable that Rathbone's Holmes is sometimes shown to be 'disagreeable'

to Watson: “surely no one of intellectual worth would want to be associated with this clown” (Davies 61). The phrase 'boobus Britannicus' was used once to blame an illustrator for making Watson look stupid (Redmond 47), and “[t]here are elements of Bruce's later 'Boobus Britannicus Filmicus' in [*The Hound of the Baskervilles*]” (Ward par. 5). Redmond explains these elements' function as being “the better to set off Basil Rathbone's Holmes”, but “the original Watson is no boob” (47). Indeed he is not: he may indeed lag behind Holmes – remember how Le Carré calls him “that plodding Watson” whom the reader simply *must* be smarter than – but mostly, he is shown by Doyle to be a trustworthy and competent man, who is “valuable as a reliable ally in time of emergency, the man who carries the gun in several crises and who will keep his wits about him” (Redmond 47).

Despite the clownish portrayal of Watson that contradicts the image created by Doyle, the films are able to convey to some that sense of strong friendship that is present in the originals. For example, Magee says that the “Rathbone-Bruce films were much more than just Sherlock Holmes mysteries, they were films about the friendship of Holmes and Watson” (“Part Five,” par. 31) – just as the stories were more than just detective stories. Indeed, the loyal Watson makes an appearance every once in a while: “in at least two of the films [...] it is he who saves Holmes” (Steinbrunner qtd. in Redmond, 238). Interestingly, the fact that Bruce's Watson was such a semi-senile fool did not make the films less successful at all: when Rathbone started to lose interest in playing Holmes (despite saying in 1938 that playing Sherlock meant more to him “than ten Hamlets” (see Ward, par. 3)), Bruce started playing a larger, comic part and “is deservedly given much of the credit for the success of their films” (Redmond 238). It is, however, not the Watson as invented by Arthur Conan Doyle and has in fact done much to create the view that it *was*. Nonetheless, “he played the part with charm, raising the profile of the cinematic Watson in the process” (Davies 38). In fact, it seems that only after Bruce played Watson, the importance of Watson as Holmes' friend and companion was realised: “None of the screen Watsons up to Bruce had enjoyed the luxury of co-star status –

they all did afterwards” (39).

Chapter 3

Jeremy Brett and David Burke/Edward Hardwicke: Depression and Friendship

This chapter discusses Rathbone's successor, one might say, as the alleged 'best' Holmes: Jeremy Brett. The television series and films he features in are, however, less obviously influenced by their time period (1984-1994) than by their main actor, Brett, and the adaptations that preceded the series (which were, according to creator and producer Michael Cox, wrong). There are interesting differences with the Universal-films that illustrate changes in the portrayal of Doyle's Holmes-stories, most importantly concerning the depiction of Watson (played by David Burke in the first series and by Edward Hardwicke in all following productions), who is no longer an imbecile.

For four decades, Rathbone remained *the* best Holmes in many eyes. It is not that no further adaptations were created – after all, Holmes is the “most portrayed detective” of all time (Guinness World Records). There were in fact many films and television shows after Rathbone, but most aimed “to present the character from a different and unusual angle” (Davies 100), in which “unusual” is mildly put: John Cleese turned Holmes into “a bumbling idiot” (100) in 1973, *The Adventure of Sherlock Holmes' Smarter Brother* (1975) “merely ridiculed the man” (102), whereas *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution* (1976) focusses on Holmes the cocaine-addict and shows Moriarty (Laurence Olivier) as “a feeble old man” (104). There are many more examples, but suffice to say that none of them had much to do with the original creation of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Rather, they were parodies, instigated perhaps by the success and acclaim of the sketch shows by Monty Python. In 1975, there were also two issues of Sherlock Holmes comic books by DC Comics, once more signifying the possibility of portraying Holmes as a superhero. The issues were, however, no success, indicating a lack of interest in superheroism at this time but perhaps also predicting the

future move away from the stereotypical portrayal of Holmes with a combination of deerstalker hat, Inverness cape, pipe and magnifying glass.



Figure 3.1: The cover of the first of two comic books issued by DC Comics in 1975.

In the 1980's, enabled by the fifty-year anniversary of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's death and the expiry of the copyright on the Holmes-stories (it was not until 1996 that “to harmonize British law with European law, the term was lengthened to [the now required] 70 years” (Redmond 76)): a series of one-hour episodes started, produced by Granada Television and their producer Michael Cox. The series stars Jeremy Brett as Holmes and David Burke (later replaced by Edward Hardwicke) as Watson and is set in the Victorian era. If 9 out of 10 would name Rathbone as *the* Sherlock Holmes, that other person would probably say “Brett”: having played the detective for ten years, he is “the best-known Sherlock Holmes of the electronic era by far” (Redmond 245), and for many fans “there was no dividing line between actor and character: they were as one” (Davies 126).

When Brett started to play Holmes he was surprised to find “it wasn't all pipes and deerstalkers” (quoted in Davies, 122). The stereotypical image set by the (American) Twentieth Century Fox and Universal productions of the 40's, this statement proves, was influential and

became, for some, identical to Doyle's creation. Even after the Granada series, Charlton Heston still played a Holmes including pipe and deerstalker hat (*The Crucifer of Blood*, 1991). The stereotypical image, then, has not disappeared, but what remains is largely superficial (his look and some quotes). Brett's television series differs from the Rathbone and Bruce-films not only in the absent deerstalker but also, more importantly, in the lack of great dissimilarity between its Watson and the original (as opposed to Bruce's version). Indeed, to 'return' to Arthur Conan Doyle seemed to be the series' creators' first and foremost goal, thus implying that all previous adaptations had not been authentic. In this way, one can see the Granada series as a reaction against its predecessors that marks the eighties' reviving interest in Doyle's Holmes (now that the copyrights had expired). This vision is supported by Davies' summary of Cox's proposal to Granada: "They just sighed and moaned, 'Not corny old Sherlock Holmes again.' But that was the whole point. It wasn't 'corny old Sherlock Holmes again'; this time it was to be the exciting genuine article" (122) – the phrase "this time" suggesting the makers' objections to earlier adaptations, perceiving them as not "genuine" or inauthentic.

With authenticity as their purpose, the series' episodes are set in the Victorian age. More importantly, the series uses large pieces of dialogue from Conan Doyle; producer Cox, associate producer Stuart Doughty and programme researcher Nicky Cooney ensured that all who worked on the series read a reference manual which passed on "their [Cox, Doughty and Cooney's] knowledge and understanding of the Holmes canon" (Davies 122); this Holmes rarely wears a deerstalker hat and never an Inverness cape; the friendship between the detective and sidekick is emphasized and more believable, as Watson is no longer a bumbling fool but the man readers knew from Doyle's stories. Furthermore, Brett's acting – though his performance faltered as his health deteriorated – was considered a great interpretation of the man created by Doyle: "The casting of Jeremy Brett as Holmes was more than inspired: it was a magical yoking of star to vehicle – a combination that enriched each element and, ultimately, elevated and illuminated both. Brett became Sherlock

Holmes” (Davies 126).

But how, exactly, *was* Brett a great (or better) Holmes, and how was the series “the genuine article”? Brett had a great influence on the series, sometimes challenging decisions or making changes according to his interpretation of Conan Doyle. Like the creators, he was set on being true to the Scottish author: Davies connects this to Brett's and creator Michael Cox's decision “to use the Sidney Paget drawings as 'their image’” (124). Of course, while Paget has taken much from Doyle's texts to create *his* Holmes, his is not necessarily Doyle's: take, for example, Paget's invention of the deerstalker hat that is never mentioned in the canon. It is therefore a strange thing for Davies to say that “[d]espite his efforts to stay true to Doyle, [Brett] hated wearing a deerstalker” (127) – rather, this may be *because of* his efforts, as Holmes is never said to wear such a hat in Doyle. Paget's depiction of Holmes as a tall, thin man is true to Watson's descriptions in Doyle, however (“In height he was rather over six feet [...] excessively lean [...] eyes were sharp and piercing [...] thin, hawk-like nose” (Doyle 3.29-30)), and this depiction is also present in Brett. As he gained weight due to illness, Brett felt a “growing unease with which [he] carried on playing the character of Sherlock Holmes – a character noted for his leanness and finely chiselled features” (Davies 138). This unease highlights the value Brett attached to portraying the Holmes of Conan Doyle. His research into the character and the stories even caused him to argue against the writers' decisions sometimes (Davies 126).



Figure 3.2: Jeremy Brett as Sherlock Holmes in “The Six Napoleons” (1986).

Brett depicts Holmes' "controlled eccentricities and mannered delivery". For example, in "A Scandal in Bohemia", Brett's Holmes thinks of a case and bursts into a short, rather maniacal laugh which he quickly controls. Redmond believes that Brett's portrayal could have been subtler (indeed, the aforementioned scene is not that), and claims that Holmes was "not nearly so full of tics, shrill cries, and mindless movement as Jeremy Brett makes him" (42). However, as many "commentators have unhesitatingly seen [Holmes] as a manic-depressive personality at work" (42) Brett was perfectly suited to portray him: he, too, suffered from manic-depression (though he kept it secret for long) and therefore had "an instability that he was able to channel most effectively into his greatest performance – as Sherlock Holmes" (Davies 126). There was an instability to Brett, a two-sidedness (note, for example, how he "exploded with anger, only to beg for forgiveness the next day" (127) when Hardwicke commented on his acting) that can also be found in Holmes (for example in "The Boscombe Valley Mystery," in which Holmes apologises after knocking over a table and blaming Watson). Holmes is "secretive," "demanding" and "[m]ost notably, Holmes is moody" (42). By summarising these characteristics that are brought to the fore by Brett's style one can see that the Granada series exposes negative traits of the detective, whereas Rathbone's portrayal was – apart from certain displays of arrogance – chiefly intelligent, brave and superior and heroic.

Perhaps because of the parallels that ran between the character of Holmes and the life of Brett, the latter started making the character more and more *his*. For example, in "The Creeping Man" Brett decided to have Holmes stub out a cigarette in an egg during breakfast, an action that he later regretted (as it was "inappropriate to the character of Holmes" (Davies 154)). There were, however, also other changes, many at the recommendation (or perhaps command) of Jeremy Brett, that served to emphasize the strength of the relationship between Holmes and Watson. By making these changes and thus straying from the original stories and the series' original plans, the creators chose to expand on one of Doyle's elements – the core friendship – and depict it as they deemed

correct: there is a growing affection and equality between the two men that was not portrayed as such by *the* other Sherlock Holmes in the 1940's.

Brett and Cox believed that the spirit of Doyle's Holmes lay in the two main characters and their friendship. Creator and producer Michael Cox says: "I think that the great strength of all the stories is that the relationship between Holmes and Watson is simply one of the greatest friendships in literature" (Davies 142). To emphasize this, Brett added something to the script of "The Final Problem" by making it seem, as Holmes clings to the cliffs of Reichenbach Falls and hears Watson yell his name, as if he is about to call out for Watson. Of his motive for doing so, Brett says: "I just wanted to show that Holmes had affection for Watson and for a fleeting second his emotions almost get the better of his practical mind" (quoted in Davies, 137). Davies applauds the addition to the story, as it "is instructive, paradoxically revealing both the separateness and the closeness of the two men" (138). With this in mind, the character of Mary Morstan was removed from the stories in which she originally features: nothing, this omission suggests, ought to get in between Holmes and Watson. According to Brett, "[s]he would have got in the way. Watson was more in love with Holmes – in a pure sense – than he could have been with a woman" (qtd. in Davies 142). The same can be said vice versa, as Holmes is, as originally, uninterested in women romantically: in "The Final Problem," there is a naked female model in the room that Holmes does not even look at. Including Mary Morstan, however, might also have offered the possibility of revealing much of the friendship and how dependent they are on each other (see chapter 4.1 for this particular use in Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes* (2009)). After all, as Sherlock says in Doyle (and Brett repeats with emphasis on "lost" in the adaptation of "A Scandal in Bohemia"): "I am lost without my Boswell" (Doyle 1:12). Importantly, this "Boswell" is portrayed much unlike Bruce's Watson of the 1940's, as the creators were "determined to set the record straight on Watson, and show him as 'a reasonable man, quite a dashing fellow with moderate intelligence and a definite sense of humour'" (Davies 122). Gone is the bumbling fool, back is the man that can be found in Conan Doyle. As in the

stories, Watson is the narrator: using voice-overs, Watson provides introductions, explanations and thoughts. More importantly, he is competent. Some of his attempts at emulating Holmes' techniques even succeed: “So ardent a bicyclist must be full of energy,” says Sherlock. “Yes, I bicycle a good deal,” answers Mrs. Smith. “Slight roughening on the side of the soles, caused by the friction of the pedals,” Watson interjects, earning him a proud “Excellent, Watson!” from Holmes (“The Solitary Cyclist” 00:04:11-00:04:24).

The character of Professor Moriarty, incidentally, is not included in the works featuring Brett as often as in those with Rathbone. As the episodes follow Doyle's stories closely, this is logical: he only appears in two original stories. Realising the importance of Moriarty as a means of making the character of Holmes thrive even more, however, the Granada series added him to a story he is *not* in in Doyle: “The Red-Headed League.” Here, Moriarty is played by Eric Porter, who “played the part brilliantly, even emulating Doyle's description of the Professor moving his head in a 'strange reptilian fasion” (Davies 125). The appearance of the evil mastermind also emphasizes once again how Holmes can be seen as a hero and “a kind of intellectual superman” (126).

Brett played Holmes for ten years. In comparison and also in reaction to the Rathbone-films (which depicted Holmes largely according to Doyle but failed to do the same with Watson) the series and television films in which Brett played are more true to the original in that Watson is more competent and their friendship emphasized even more. Furthermore, and 'helped' perhaps by his mental illness, Brett developed a close yet strange relationship with Sherlock: he tried to interpret him, and make him 'his'. A quote by Brett explains why he never completely succeeded and is also of much importance in terms of (problems with) adapting Sherlock Holmes:

I never actually saw him, y'know – he was always a few steps ahead and I never caught up with him. To be Sherlock is difficult because he is such an elusive pimperl. Maybe I got one or two things right. But Sherlock is evergreen. He is one of the most elusive

intellectual geniuses who has ever been written about. (quoted in Davies, 127)

The mystery of Holmes, what Brett calls elusiveness, are pivotal to the stories' adaptations. There are many sides to him, and much that cannot be known (because Doyle never tells us) and must therefore be interpreted entirely subjectively. Each generation does this differently: where, in the 40's, Holmes' strengths were used for war-propaganda and his weaknesses unattended to, Brett's role consisted of a more balanced portrayal of strengths and weaknesses. In connection to this, where Rathbone's Sherlock was accompanied by a foolish Watson (the better to emphasize Holmes' superiority) the Granada series depicts a relationship that is more equal. These changes are not as easily tied to (socio-)political circumstances as in the previous chapter, although one could argue that the return to the original Victorian period may be typical of the years 1979-1990, of Thatcher and the Conservative party. Rather, however, it seems the return to the Victorian age and to the original stories by Conan Doyle are a reaction against all the previous adaptations that rarely did this. Of course, it is no coincidence that this wish to 'return' to Doyle coincided with the release of the author's copyright to the public domain.

Chapter 4

Downey Jr. and Cumberbatch: 21st Century Sherlocks

The years 2009 and 2010 saw a revival of film- and television adaptations of Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. For the first time in thirty years, a film adaptation of Sherlock was released in cinemas: *Sherlock Holmes*, directed by Guy Ritchie and featuring Robert Downey Jr. as Holmes and Jude Law as Watson. A sequel to the film has already been confirmed. Not long after, the BBC aired a three-episode series called *Sherlock*, set in contemporary London and featuring Benedict Cumberbatch as Sherlock and Martin Freeman as Watson. The two creators are Mark Gatiss (who also plays Holmes' brother Mycroft) and Steven Moffat (acclaimed producer of the renewed *Doctor Who*). A second season is currently in the making.

The popularity of re-imagining and re-inventing the characters and stories of Sherlock Holmes, then, is still not faltering. In fact, these 21st-century adaptations are consciously and subconsciously moving back towards the source, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and away from previous adaptations. At least, that is what some of the creators claim themselves: “[t]his is the world's most famous detective as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle intended him to be, according to the makers [of *Sherlock Holmes*]” (Hoyle par. 3). Both the film and the series *do* stray from the source in certain aspects, however: Ritchie's film is set in the 1890's, but the plot is not based on any of Doyle's stories and the villain is 'new', whereas Gatiss and Moffat take many scenes from the stories but transpose them to a contemporary, 21st century London (Sherlock does not smoke in this adaptation, but instead uses nicotine patches). Nevertheless, the film and series highlight what they consider to be the spirit of Conan Doyle, and 'go back' to him with a very modern mindset. This influence of the 21st century, for example, allows for the homo-erotic subtext between Holmes and Watson to come to the fore and emphasizes the (super)hero-villain allegories. Holmes, under the influence of modernity, becomes more and more of an action- as well as an intellectual hero, with strengths but

also with increasingly visible weaknesses.

4.1: Robert Downey Jr. and Jude Law's Holmes and Watson as Action Heroes in Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes*

The opening scenes of *Sherlock Holmes* (2009) immediately show Guy Ritchie's signature and the fact that this film will offer a new take on the detective's adventures. Holmes and Watson fight their way through several henchmen and save a woman from a seance-like ritual performed by villain Lord Blackwood. Holmes' intellect, too, is immediately depicted, but he uses his brain not so much for deductions based on a clue as for a physicality different from Rathbone's and Brett's: before he corners a guard, a slow-motion sequence shows how he plans to attack the man and what he predicts the reactions will be. The amount of frames per second then returns to the regular number, and Holmes is proven right, disabling the man in a second with martial arts. In the film's commentary track, Ritchie describes this ability as "Holmes-o-vision". Watson may not have Holmes-o-vision, but his fighting skills are proven to be adequate in the scene that follows (and, in the rest of the film). This Holmes and Watson are presented like action heroes and are nothing like any previous depictions of the duo – so how are these the *true* Conan Doyle-characters?

By explicitly moving away from previous films – "it was going to be a different take on the older films ... back to the books" (Law quoted in Hoyle, par 6), "the original movies they were stuffy. ... Clearly Sherlock is ... a man of action" (producer Silver quoted in Hoyle, par. 7) – the makers of this film imply that those previous films were nothing like the original stories, and that this film *will* be. Kevin Toma begins his review of the film by asking if this is the *real* Sherlock, but then largely agrees with the makers in saying that the image people have of Holmes is "less a product of the stories that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930) published about him than of the countless film- and television adaptations that followed"¹ (par. 4). Ritchie's film obviously wants to shed the images of previous adaptations, although it fails to do so at several points: the seance-

¹ My translation. Original: "minder een product van de verhalen die Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930) over hem publiceerde, dan van de talloze film- en televisiebewerkingen die daarop volgden"

opening scene reminds Toma of the film *Young Sherlock Holmes* (“as if Ritchie is still secretly building on the cinematic legacy of the detective duo”² (par. 20)) and a scene in the film where Downey Jr. plays the violin to houseflies to see how they react is not in the books, but very similar to a scene with Rathbone. These examples aside, however, there are certainly aspects of the stories in this film that had not been depicted in the Rathbone- and Brett-adaptations. This shows yet again that “Holmes is a treasure chest filled with paraphernalia, talents, charms and unmannerliness from which every film or adaptation can take its pick”³ (Toma par. 15) and that there is so much, yet so little that we know of Holmes. In the case of Ritchie's film, the result is not so much a product of previous films as of Doyle *and* the 21st century (just as the earlier films were a combined product of Doyle *and* the time in which they were made).

The idea of Sherlock Holmes as a fighter is not entirely incompatible with Arthur Conan Doyle's descriptions. Number 11 on Watson's list of Holmes' limits (*A Study in Scarlet*) is: “Is an expert singlestick player, boxer, and swordsman” (3.35). In *The Sign of Four*, Holmes alludes to boxing as his hobby when reminding McMurdo that he was “that amateur who fought three rounds with you at Alison's rooms” (to which McMurdo replies that Holmes “wasted [his] gifts” by not fighting for a living (3.262)). In “The Adventure of the Solitary Cyclist,” Holmes gets into a pub fight and calls it “delicious” (2.915). Lastly, in “The Adventure of the Empty House,” Sherlock attributes surviving his fight with Moriarty to his knowledge of the (fictional) martial art of “baritsu, or the Japanese system of wrestling” (Doyle 2.791). Further mentions of Holmes' proficiency at fighting are scarce in the canon (and actual depictions of it even scarcer, save the occasional tackle or scuffle (“The Red-Headed League,” *A Study in Scarlet*)), but enough for Ritchie to expand on. Looking at the following definition of action film and -hero, one can see that there are parallels that make Ritchie's interpretation understandable:

² My translation. Original: “alsof Ritchie stiekem toch voortbouwt op de filmische erfenis van het speurdersduo.”

³ My translation. Original: “Holmes is een schatkist aan paraferalia, talenten, charmes en onhebbelijkheden waar elke film of bewerking zijn eigen greep uit kan doen.”

The action film formula finds the hero, usually a marginalized law enforcer or other warrior, striving to subjugate (rather than investigate) some criminal element. Often, the hero will rely chiefly on the signature weapon with which he is associated, possibly on a partner, marginally on puns and one-liners, and never on the bureaucracy that tries to constrain him.” (Lichtenfeld 17-18)

If one were to see Holmes, as a consulting detective, as a *marginalized* law enforcer, see (the powers of) his brain as his weapon (as the action hero's weapon is usually for use of physical violence), Watson as his partner, and his “the plot thickens” and “the game is afoot” as one-liners, then seeing Holmes as an action hero is not that far-fetched at all, especially because of his dislike of bureaucracy. The only aspect mentioned above that would disqualify Holmes for the role of action hero is the fact that the investigation is of at least as much importance as the subjugation of criminals.



Figure 4.1: Robert Downey Jr. in a fighting scene, illustrating his depiction as action hero in Ritchie's film.

The second instance in which Holmes' “Holmes-o-vision” is shown is when Holmes goes to a sort of brawl, in a shed called the 'Punchbowl', where fighters are bet on. The vigour shown by Downey Jr. corresponds with Holmes' statement in Doyle that he delighted in a pub fight: bare-chested and bloody-knuckled (nothing, incidentally, like the tall, lean, hawk-nosed man in Conan Doyle) he knocks out his opponent. A very free interpretation of the few mentions in Doyle of

Sherlock's skills, the scene is significant and telling as to how Holmes, the man, is being re-imagined according to a modern vision. Firstly, the phrases “intellectual action hero” (“Guy Ritchie Plans” par. 4) and “intellectual superman” (Davies 126) are being taken quite literally: the *action* scenes depict Holmes' *intellect* and its superiority compared to others in terms of speed and the ability to observe and notice (what others may not). Another example of this in the film is in the beginning, where Watson storms at Blackwood but Holmes stops him just in time, revealing a glass spike Blackwood was holding and aiming at Watson. “Observe,” says Sherlock. “How did you see that?” “Because I was looking for it” (00:05:30-00:05:40). This ties in with the following comment by Ritchie: “One of the reasons that Holmes is a social recluse is because he absorbs too much information.” This comment is followed by the next, which touches upon another revealing aspect to the 'new' Holmes as depicted in the Punchbowl-scene:

You see, he finds it hard to be in social environments because he finds it very tricky to filter through what is pertinent and what is not. This is why he is kind of socially awkward and why he cares so much for Watson, who really is the, I suppose, sort of conduit through which he can see the world in some kind of sane way. (00:12:00-00:12:39)

Holmes' fondness for Watson is visible in the Punchbowl-scene because it is also the reason behind Holmes' going there: he is visibly frustrated, angry and sad after a conversation with his companion, who is about to marry Mary Morstan and move out of the Baker Street lodgings – the Punchbowl-fight takes his mind off this. Throughout the film, sub-textual tension between the two characters is present. According to Ide, the film “positively throbs with sexual tension and tacit longing between the boozy, brawling bad boy Holmes of Robert Downey Jr and Jude Law's dashing, pouting Watson” (par. 1). Much of the tension and longing is suggested by Holmes' behaviour, which leans strongly towards jealousy. Law says in the commentary that “[t]here's quite a strong theme in our film, which is that they can't live with each other, can't live without each

other” (01:32:48). Producer Wigram agrees: “I think without Watson, Holmes would sort of self-destruct, would implode” (02:01:13).

In their depiction of the friendship, the creators then made an important change by, noting how important Watson is to Holmes, making the relationship more equal: “Traditionally, Watson has always been portrayed as a rather bumbling, slightly overweight fool, comparatively... the kind of subservient sidekick to the genius Holmes. And I thought that was not only unfair, I didn't think it was authentic to what I believe to be Conan Doyle's vision, that really they were more Butch and Sundance, they were more equal” (Ritchie, 00:03:15-00:03:32). Holmes is shown to value Watson's (medical) opinion, as in the originals. They depend upon each other: Holmes needs Watson as that “conduit” for sanity (after Holmes has locked himself up out of boredom, catching houseflies and playing the violin to them, it is Watson who brings him back to earth) while Watson needs Holmes because he longs for the thrill of adventures and perhaps also because of his gambling problem: in the film, Holmes asks Watson if he should keep his money (as they walk past people playing a game on the street), alluding to the scene in the original short story in which Holmes is shown to keep Watson's money in a (locked) drawer. But they are also equal in the sense that Watson is given a voice, with which he can stand up to some of Holmes' arrogant behaviour. Most importantly, the frustrations a reader is made to imagine the character of Watson to feel in the originals are now voiced by the character and made explicit: angrily, Watson tells Holmes that he himself must be “psychologically disturbed. Why else would I continually be led into situations where you deliberately withhold your plans from me?” (00:57:35). Here, the creators comment on the tendency of Doyle('s Holmes) to refrain from giving the solution to a case the moment he deduces it. Watson, however, never protests in Doyle, the films featuring Rathbone nor the series starring Brett. It is a modern idea, then, that the hero and sidekick are in a partnership that makes the latter more capable and, as a consequence, the hero less superior. Indeed, Ritchie's film (re)presents the idea that heroes, too, are vulnerable and have weaknesses.

So Watson is one weakness of Holmes, as his looming departure visibly upsets Holmes (it precedes his going to the Punchbowl, a conversation about it brings tears to his eyes, as does Mary Morstan's comment that she knows he cares about Watson). There are several other things Ritchie shows to be weaknesses of the protagonist. Firstly, it is indicated several times that while Sherlock's brilliance has its obvious advantages, it can also work against him. Although Ritchie says that Holmes is "rather arrogant, [but] he's allowed to be arrogant because he's quite brilliant" (00:13:50), this arrogance and brilliance cause him to be socially insensitive: for example, in a scene where Mary Morstan challenges Holmes to make deductions about her, he accuses her of having left her husband (but he is wrong, her husband has passed away). Mary then empties her glass of wine in Sherlock's face and storms off, with Watson in tow. Holmes' mind is thus portrayed as knowing no (social) boundaries and thereby pushing people away, even though he needs these people for the sake of his own sanity.

His other weakness, according to the film, is *the* woman, Irene Adler. Adler appears in Doyle only once, in "A Scandal in Bohemia," but Rachel McAdams (who plays Adler) gets quite some screen time as Irene's role has been expanded. The film-makers claim her character was of greater importance to that of Holmes than the stories (and many earlier adaptations) may suggest. Her first appearance in the film is in that (yet again) telling scene in the Punchbowl, and even causes Holmes to be distracted from his fight (and receiving a right-hook punch to his jaw). "Traditionalists will no doubt be up in arms at the very idea that Holmes has anything other than the pursuit of criminals on his mind" (Ide par. 1), especially a woman. After all, it was stressed repeatedly in Conan Doyle that Holmes did not take much interest in them and did not trust them. In Ritchie's film, Holmes is depicted as being "a little bit more red-blooded than had been shown in previous productions. We wanted to illustrate his interest in Irene Adler" (Ritchie 00:17:10-00:17-15). In doing so, the misogynistic element to Holmes as found in Doyle is disregarded, and his interest in a woman causes the character to have yet another weakness.

To have a weakness, or “emotional instability,”⁴ is what Toma believes to be the “last condition for the modern superhero”⁵ - a status which therefore applies to the Holmes of Ritchie's 2009-film. It gives him a human side – something that, quite literally, all superheroes have: for Batman it is Bruce Wayne, for Spiderman it is Peter Clarke, for Superman it is Clark Kent and for Sherlock Holmes it is Sherlock Holmes, with thanks to Watson. With Watson at his side (as the Robin to Sherlock's Batman), Holmes as depicted in Ritchie's film shows many parallels with not only the action hero, but also the archetypal superhero: apart from Watson, the sidekick, there is also love interest Irene Adler as his Achilles' heel, similar to Lois Lane; he has weaknesses (Toma notes how Ritchie also implies the detective has “bipolar disorder” and “Asperger's syndrome”⁶ (par. 22)) and therefore a human side that contrasts his superiority in other areas (Spiderman is insecure, Batman is traumatised); and, of course, there is a villain, a nemesis. The nemesis is the opposite of the hero and represents evil (whereas the hero represents good). Mark Strong, who plays the villain in *Sherlock Holmes*, says of his character (the mystical leader of a Masonic society): “As a scientist, as a pragmatist, as somebody who cannot avoid seeing the obvious and the definite, to have his nemesis somebody who is dabbling in the exact opposite is a really quite wonderful way of setting good against bad” (01:10:17).

The superhero-theme can also be seen as one of the 21st century-influences to the adaptation. For more than a hundred years now, the character of Sherlock Holmes has been re-imagined again and again, and each imagining is influenced by its time. In 2009's *Sherlock Holmes* film, for example, there is a woman given more 'attention' than in previous adaptations: while this may not correlate with Conan Doyle, it was not done with Rathbone and Brett: a more feminist mindset now shines through, because while it can be argued that Adler has been written into the screenplay because a Hollywood-film about a man without a love interest is 'not done', her character is not portrayed superficially. In fact, it shows development (from using Holmes in a scheme to revealing

⁴ My translation. Orig.: “emotionele instabiliteit”

⁵ My translation. Orig.: “laatste voorwaarde voor de moderne superheld”

⁶ My translations. Orig.: “bipolaire persoonlijkheidsstoornis” and “het syndroom van Asperger”

Moriarty's presence and wanting to protect Sherlock from the villain) and capability (she fights off two burglars by herself). Furthermore, it can be seen that this is a 21st century (Hollywood) production in the fact that it is an action film. It is true that budgets and techniques used for films nowadays allow for action scenes as in *Sherlock Holmes* the way they did not in the 40's and 80's. It is, however, also part of the expectations of audiences to have such scenes. This is where we arrive at the connection between the superhero-parallels and the influence of the 21st century: these expectations have been fulfilled by a comic-book- and superhero-trend in the cinema of the past few years.

The “late-1990s rash of films based on comic book properties” (Lichtenfeld 253) has continued into the next decade, where the comic book property of “the hero and his or her superheroic dimensions has reached a level popularity never witnessed before” (Ndalianis, *Super/heroes*, 4). The comic book element is “increasingly co-opted by the fantastical form of the action genre” because “the genre's aesthetics would increasingly emulate those of the comics” (254). Ndalianis notes in *Super/heroes: From Hercules to Superman* how not just the action genre but many films and television series have emulated these aesthetics: “The comic book aesthetic or, more specifically, the superhero comic book aesthetic, has been overtly present in film and television over the last five years or so ... film and television series have adopted and adapted comic book styles to add a stamp of legitimacy to their fictional world” (4). Ndalianis then gives the example of the television series *Heroes*, which “has adopted the comic book aesthetic in an attempt to prove its authenticity or status as superhero text” (6). If *Sherlock Holmes* also uses this aesthetic, it can therefore be ascertained it is (or tries to be) a superhero text. Like many modern Hollywood films, Ritchie's Holmes-adaptation is fast-paced and graphic. This pace can be seen in the way the action leaves little room for actual detective work: the detecting there is (an examination of a suspect's room, for example) is interrupted by henchmen and a following fight. This is also typical of the action film genre: “The intervals between these [fighting] sequences are precisely regulated

such that these encounters are the film's (and the genre's) most persistent and defining structural feature” (Lichtenfeld 18). As for graphics, when Holmes explains a case or solution his words are illustrated with images and flashbacks. This cinematic style of Ritchie's is especially reminiscent of comic-books. Ide, too, believes his film to be “an irreverent comic-book take on Sherlock Holmes” (par. 1) “that has more in common with the work of Frank Miller [a comic book artist, writer of graphic novels and film director/producer] than with Conan Doyle” (par. 4). Now, comic-book adaptations have become increasingly big budget films. Take, for example, the on-going series of *X-men*, *Spiderman* and *Batman* films that attract (and cost) millions, and these may well have influenced the depiction of Holmes. Ritchie's sleuth would not be misplaced among those superhero- and comic-book adaptations – the graphic style, the protagonist as a superhero with weaknesses – which suggests that Holmes, despite being depicted in 1890's London, can be “reimagined as a contemporary creature” (Ide par. 4). With this comic-book hero-hype in the background of this film, just as other hypes were at the core of other adaptations (war propaganda in the Universal-productions with Rathbone; an Indiana Jones-hype in *Young Sherlock Holmes* (1985), which concerned “sinister scenes in hidden temples”⁷ (Toma, par. 18) and can also be placed in the action/adventure genre), one can conclude that this adaptation's Holmes was definitely influenced by its time. While Holmes was always a superhero – Zanuck, boss of 20th Century Fox when the first film with Rathbone was filmed, already called him “the superman of literary history” (Toma, par. 8) (referring perhaps more to Nietzsche's “Übermensch” than to Superman, with a capital S, who had only appeared in a comic the year before, in 1938) – Ritchie's film makes him a modern (quick, eccentric, emotional, vulnerable) one.

⁷ My translation. Orig.: “griezelige taferelen in verborgen tempels”

4.2: Benedict Cumberbatch as a Text-messaging Holmes in BBC's *Sherlock*

Not long after Downey Jr. adopted a British accent to play Holmes in a Hollywood film, the BBC produced a three-episode series starring Benedict Cumberbatch in the title-role. *Sherlock* (2010) was created by Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat, both known for their work on *Doctor Who*. The series differs from the Ritchie-film in many aspects: for example, while there are chases in *Sherlock* – as in Doyle – the fighting is not nearly as skilled or emphasized as in *Sherlock Holmes*. Instead, the focus is on the detective work and character development – the parallels to the archetypal hero can still be made, but this Sherlock is no action hero. Also important are the facts that the series is set in contemporary London and that it is reacting less *against* previous adaptations than combining them with the original to come up with a new, re-imagined Sherlock. In this re-imagination, the time in which it was created is discernible in – apart from the fact that it is set *in* the 21st century – the fact that the homo-erotic subtext is brought to the fore and that Sherlock, as with Downey Jr., is explored in depth (as is Watson, whose importance and friendship is also emphasized), resulting in a character portrayal that consists of strengths as well as weaknesses. In this case, his motivation and status as a (possible) hero are not established, but put up for discussion.

In the commentary for episode 1, “A Study in Pink,” Gatiss states that they “decided early on that everything was canonical – every version. We’re not just drawing on the stories but [also] the Rathbone-films, Jeremy Brett...” (00:39:00-00:39:10). This can be seen in several ways: Cumberbatch, for example, used the portrayals of Holmes by Rathbone and, especially, Brett as an inspiration. “I sort of wanted to play with motifs of that [the physical acting-style of Brett] that people could recognize as being Holmesian because, without the pipe, without the deerstalker, without the old magnifying glass, it was important to establish certain codas [sic] and behavioural, physical patterns that were recognisably Holmesian,” he says on the commentary track of the third

episode, “The Great Game” (00:37:23-00:37:37). Furthermore, the Rathbone-films set in the 40’s inspired Gatiss and Moffat to update the stories to the modern day, as they like these films best of all (screen) adaptations (“A Study in Pink” audio track). However, despite the claim that they drew on more than the original stories, this is not very visible beyond the above examples. In fact, the episodes are filled with endless references to Conan Doyle, while there are only a few nods to Rathbone and Brett, whose influence, for the general viewer, is restricted to the contemporary setting (Rathbone) and the physicality of Cumberbatch's acting (Brett).

The references to the originals are largely in the details. Plot-wise, the writers have created basically new stories that draw heavily on Doyle's plot *devices* and made them their own. For example, where the murder victim in Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet* writes “Rache” on the floor and Holmes (rightly) contradicts the police in saying it is German for ‘revenge’ rather than the incomplete name ‘Rachel’, “A Study in Pink” has Scotland Yard assuming it is ‘revenge’ while Holmes (rightly) claims it is meant to be ‘Rachel’. Most details from the canon, however, are used in the series in an updated form: whereas, in Doyle, Sherlock prefers to send telegrams rather than write, this Sherlock prefers to send text messages rather than call. The detective does not smoke: in order to concentrate, he now puts nicotine patches on his arm (“This is a three patch problem” (“A Study in Pink”) as opposed to a “three pipe problem” (“The Red-Headed League”). Watson does not write down their adventures but blogs about them (a task set by his therapist because of his post-traumatic stress disorder after serving in Afghanistan, where Doyle's Watson also served). Such changes are, of course, necessary if one is to place Holmes in a contemporary environment. Martin Freeman, who plays Watson, was sceptical at first of the update, but believes it still “captures the essence of the original. It's still about solving crimes, just using the tools available to the 21st century detective rather than the 19th century sleuth. Sherlock Holmes wouldn't have used 18th century methods and tools in the 19th century, when the stories were set, so why should he use anything less than 21st century technology in the present day?” (Wightman par. 5). As for that

essence of the originals, the update indeed does not seem to alter it. On the contrary, it is a pivotal element in the series.

The essence is, also in the view of *Sherlock*'s cast and crew, in the characters and their relationships. In a review, Gilbert says the series “capture[s] what was vital about Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, that he has charisma” (par. 12), while Freeman says that “still at the heart of the drama is the relationship between Holmes and Watson. That's pivotal” (Wightman par. 6). The latter is emphasized by Gatiss and Moffat in the commentary (to episode 1):

[Conan Doyle] allows one, in the whole sixty story-canon, he allows *one* moment of genuine affection between Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson. You always know it is there... there is one moment in “The Three Garridebs” of Holmes’, for a moment – yes, ‘you’ve hurt my Watson’ – and that is it. And I think arguably, and we would argue quite strongly, that under the surface, the detective stories are *merely* the surface. It is the story of the greatest friendship ever. (00:11:45-00:12:09)

The moment Moffat refers to is one where Holmes does not say “you’ve hurt my Watson,” but where he does indeed seem exceptionally protective and affective (compared to the rest of the canon).

‘You’re not hurt, Watson? For God’s sake, say that you are not hurt!’

It was worth a wound – it was worth many wounds – to know the depth of loyalty and love which lay behind that cold mask. The clear, hard eyes were dimmed for a moment, and the firm lips were shaking. For the one and only time I caught a glimpse of a great heart as well as of a great brain. All my years of humble but single-minded service culminated in that moment of revelation. (Doyle 2.1598)

While there is no such revelation in the first series of *Sherlock*, the implications evident from this scene as to what kind of friendship Holmes and Watson have seems to be at the core of the series. It is not for nothing that Moffat refers to it: the episodes contain many moments in which mutual

affection is obviously implied, but not made explicit. “I'd be lost without my blogger,” says Sherlock to Watson in “The Great Game” (alluding to “I am lost without my Boswell” in Doyle's “A Scandal in Bohemia”), and he seems to appreciate Watson's opinion and presence, requesting both at several instances. On the surface, however, Holmes' arrogant stance and derogatory remarks towards Watson abound. After Sherlock asks for Watson's opinion, and the latter attempts to deduce facts from a pair of shoes, the following dialogue occurs: “How did I do?” “Well, John, really well. I mean, you missed almost everything of importance, but you know...” (00:21:03-00:21:11). Note, incidentally, how first names are used, as opposed to the originals *and* all other adaptations discussed in this thesis. The creators must have realised that for them to call each other by their last names in a modernised adaptation would be unrealistic. The use of first names, however, also indicates affection slightly more so than use of last names. And indeed, it is concerning this affection that the 21st century *really* shines through in this series: there are several allusions – explicit, scripted references – to theories about Holmes and Watson's sexuality.

Surrounded by less controversy and taboo than thirty, let alone sixty years ago, homosexuality is a subject that, in a modern adaptation of Conan Doyle's stories, would be harder *not* to touch upon than to use, especially as the stories concern a friendship between two men, one of whom is notoriously uninterested in women. The film *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*, directed by Billy Wilder, shows Holmes claiming Watson is his lover in the year 1970, so the topic was addressed in previous adaptations, but the film is comedic and, more importantly, Holmes' claim is not true. Still, the way in which speculations about the two friends are addressed in *Sherlock* can be explained (and is allowed) by the time in which the series is made and is set, a time in which the topic is easier to broach. Reviewer Sophie Elmhirst agrees: “The best bit of this 'Look how modern we've made it!' stuff was the gay undertones” (44). The word undertone is putting it mildly, however, considering the following scenes: in the first episode, Mrs. Hudson assumes Sherlock and John are a couple, as does a waiter later in the same episode. At this point, Watson

asks Holmes about his sexual preferences:

“You don't have a girlfriend then?”

“Girlfriend? No, not really my area.”

“Hm. Oh, right. Do you have a boyfriend? Which is fine, by the way.”

“I know it's fine.”

“So you've got a boyfriend then.”

“No.”

“Right. OK. You're unattached, like me. Fine. Good.”

“John, erm... I think you should know that I consider myself married to my work.”

(00:50:36-00:51:12)

In a tongue-in-cheek manner, the series thus addresses on-going speculations and theories about Doyle's main characters, while also signifying the asexuality of Holmes which the original stories indicated. Hardly any women appear in more than one episode, and none are of interest to Holmes (as opposed to Irene Adler's expanded role in Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes*).

Sherlock's Holmes is married to his work. This is evident from the portrayal in the series, which shows the protagonist in energetic bursts when he is on a case and in bouts of boredom and depression when he is not (“A nice murder, that'll cheer you up,” Mrs. Hudson tells him in “The Great Game”, 00:06:02-00:06:05). Boredom, one gets from the series, is Holmes' kryptonite (yet another parallel to the archetypal superhero): in the beginning of “The Great Game,” Sherlock takes to shooting a smiley face into the wall out of boredom (the scene refers to one in Doyle's “His Last Bow,” where Holmes shoots the Queen's initials into a wall – the scene is also referred to in Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes*, where gunshots are heard from Holmes' room). But, like kryptonite, boredom has the potential of doing much more damage to Holmes: after Sherlock almost takes a potentially deadly pill while trying to outsmart a murderer, Watson tells him “You'd do anything, anything at all, to stop being bored.” Sherlock does not deny this, implying that it is true. This is

one example of how the series also shows a darker side to Holmes, who would risk losing his life to complete a case. In the same scene, Watson's words convey a similar notion: "You risk your life to prove you're clever" (01:24:15-01:24:16).

As the citations above suggest, *Sherlock's* capable Watson has a voice with which he exclaims admiration ("That [string of deductions] was amazing" ("A Study in Pink" 00:20:46-00:20:49)) but also disappointment or condemnation. The most important instance where Watson comments on Holmes' behaviour is in "The Great Game," where people's lives depend upon Sherlock's solving of (Moriarty's) puzzles.

"There are lives at stake, Sherlock, actual human lives. Just so I know, do you care about that at all?"

"Will caring about them help me save them?"

"Nope."

"Then I continue not to make that mistake."

"And you find that easy, do you?"

"Yes, very. Is that news to you?"

"No, no."

"I've disappointed you."

"That's good. Good deduction, yeah."

"Don't make people into heroes, John. Heroes don't exist and if they did I wouldn't be one of them." (00:50:02-00:50:28)

Watson's expression of disappointment in this scene is important in several ways. Firstly, the fact that he voices this feeling and becomes, as a sidekick, more equal to his companion, seems to be a modern influence (as it is also the case in Ritchie's film and began, if you will, in the Granada-series from 1984). This indicates that modern producers/directors and audiences tend to defy, at least somewhat, the opposition of superiority and inferiority. This leads to the second aspect to the above

dialogue that is relevant: it makes Holmes into a character with weaknesses, who is therefore not as superior as he may superficially seem. The weakness indicated above is one where he cares more about solving a case than the victims. Sherlock himself then suggests that he should not be considered a hero, presumably because of weaknesses such as that one. If, as Toma suggests, weaknesses are an essential part of what constitutes a “modern hero,” then the term also applies to Holmes. The modern hero, one might also say, is rather an anti-hero: “Instead of manifesting largeness, dignity, power, or heroism, the antihero is petty, ignominious, passive, clownish, or dishonest” (Abrams 12). Holmes, however, possesses traits which would categorise him as both hero and anti-hero (power but also passivity). His character as depicted in the series is therefore changing into a new category or a mixture that is influenced by the modern view on heroism.

Sherlock is about Sherlock's strengths as well as his weaknesses. This is in itself significant, but just as remarkable and typical of the time is the way in which his intellect and (super)powers of deduction are depicted in a modern fashion, namely graphically. Where Ritchie's film shows Holmes' fast thought process in slow-motion before their execution in the form of action (“Holmes-o-vision”), Moffat and Gatiss show, as Holmes investigates a victim's body, for example, a fast and flashy compilation of close-ups where words appear on screen as they, it is hereby suggested, pop into Sherlock's mind. As he looks at a body's finger in “A Study in Pink,” the camera zooms in on her wedding ring (the pop-up word is “dirty,” followed by the deductions “unhappily married 10+ years”, 00:25:14-00:25:18), and when he takes the ring off, there is a close-up of the ring's inside: popping up are “clean,” then “regularly removed,” then “serial adulterer” (00:25:23-00:25:32). So not by means of words but by images is the viewer taken through Sherlock's thought process – this shows the influence of a modern society that is increasingly focussed on the graphic and written rather than the spoken (see also the series' use of text messaging and the consultation of the internet or mobile phone applications).

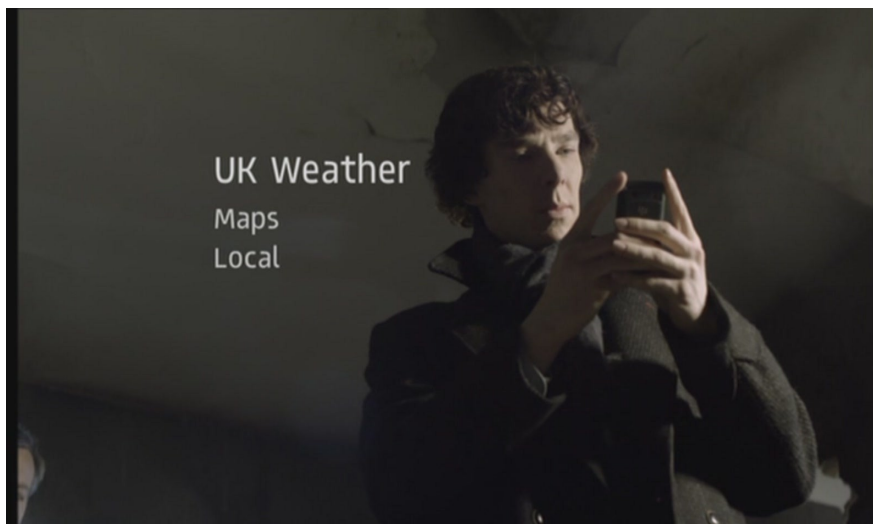


Figure 4.2: Benedict Cumberbatch as Sherlock Holmes, using an application on his phone to find out where it has rained in the past 48 hours. From “A Study in Pink.”

Sherlock's weaknesses are not depicted graphically, they are implied by certain statements or actions. One of the weaknesses was commented on by Watson in the hero-scene, the dialogue in which implies the obsessive and dangerous nature of Sherlock while 'solving puzzles'. Furthermore, Holmes' arrogance is evident in the series, but is also implied to sometimes be unwarranted: in “The Blind Banker”, Sherlock goes to another man for advice. “What? Sorry?” asks a surprised and amused Watson. “You heard me perfectly, I'm not saying it again,” answers Sherlock, who is thus shown to be not wholly superior and to sometimes need help (a fact that he himself considers a weakness, considering his refusal to repeat his “I need to ask some advice”) (00:26:11-00:26:18). Yet another instance where Holmes is portrayed as having faults “includes an aspect of Holmes' intellect ignored by other screen versions: the fact that the great detective is completely clueless in some regards, that he wilfully ignores all aspects of 'useless' knowledge – such as politics, philosophy and the fact that the earth revolves around the sun – that might otherwise clutter his mind” (Gilbert par. 8). Lastly, there are many mentions and indications of Holmes being an anti-social creature, who was hated at school (“The Blind Banker,” 00:08:12) and says things that are considered unacceptable, socially. Of this weakness, too, he is aware: “Maybe he used the death of her daughter somehow' [says Watson. Sherlock replies:] 'That was ages ago, why would she still be upset? (awkward silence) Not good?’” (00:58:39-00:58:47). In the same episode, Sherlock also tells

an officer he is “not a psychopath, I'm a high-functioning sociopath” (00:57:53-00:57:55). His strengths prevail, however, in almost all cases, behind all of which is the inevitable supervillain Moriarty, depicted as a psychopath who differs only slightly from Holmes – thankfully, however, Holmes “realises he *does* have a heart; he’s one of *us*, not one of *them*” in the final episode's standoff between the two arch-enemies, between good and evil (commentary 01:26:07-01:26:11).

So, both 2010-adaptations of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's detective stories differ in terms of plot, amount of action, and women (there is no main female character in *Sherlock*, whereas Irene Adler is turned into one in *Sherlock Holmes*). However, both productions share important aspects that are not found in the Rathbone- and Brett-adaptations and are influenced by contemporary society. While the focus is, as in previous adaptations *and* Doyle, on the friendship between Holmes and Watson, Ritchie and Moffat depicted a friendship that is more equal than was previously shown. Watson gets a voice and his value is no longer underestimated – he is more than a buffoon. More importantly, the relationship is more equal because while the parallels with (super)heroism are still present (in the form of powers, sidekick and villain) there has been an important addition to the myth, if you will, of hero Holmes and sidekick Watson: Holmes has become a *modern* superhero in that he is vulnerable, and has weaknesses. He thus possesses traits that would allow him to be placed in several categories: he is part hero, modern hero, action hero, superhero, and anti-hero, all at the same time. The character may be the archetypal hero, but he transcends all boundaries of genre and archetype when it comes to his multiplicity as hero.

Apart from the allusions to this addition of weaknesses to a modern trend of adapting comic-book superheroes, there is another explanation for the change in representation of Holmes that can be linked to modern society. That is to say, there is a significant number of reviews of the film as well as the series in which words to do with Asperger syndrome are used. The term is a relatively modern invention: while autism was officially recognized as a disorder in 1980, Asperger was not

listed in the International Classification of Diseases until 1994 (ICD-10) (see Klin). Now that the symptoms for Asperger's are known, it has become easy to both recognise them in Sherlock's character and also to use them in his depiction, whereas earlier, he was eccentric rather than vulnerable and diagnosable with a disorder. Current knowledge has now led to “Cumberbatch's somewhat Asperger's Holmes” (Gilbert par. 10) and the fact that “Ritchie and producer Mark Wigam read between the lines that Holmes suffers from bipolar personality disorder and Asperger's syndrome”⁸ (Toma par. 22) and allows for, yet again, new attempts to delve into the mind of Conan Doyle's character.

⁸ My translation. Original: “Ritchie en producer Mark Wigam lezen ook tussen de regels dat Holmes aan een bipolaire persoonlijkheidsstoornis lijdt, en aan het syndroom van Asperger”.

Conclusion: Between (Super)hero and Modern Anti-hero, From Inferior Sidekick to Valuable Friend

There are aspects of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's original stories of Sherlock Holmes that return in every adaptation. These aspects can therefore be said to be timeless. Each time, there is a friendship between Holmes and Watson and each time there are parallels to an archetypal hero. Paradoxically, however, these timeless aspects are adapted and depicted differently throughout time, often according to the time frame in which the adaptation is produced.

In the case of the hero parallels, there is a change in the idea on what constitutes a hero or superhero as time progresses and this change can be seen in the adaptations. In the 40's, when Universal Studios produced several Holmes-films, Sherlock was depicted as an exemplary war-hero. He is brave, extremely intelligent, not too eccentric (and therefore unpredictable) and a bringer of justice. In propagandistic style, he was adapted to give hope in a time when heroes were much wanted and needed. In the 80's and 90's, when Brett starred as Holmes in several television series and films by Granada Television, this was beginning to change: while still superiorly intelligent, Holmes is shown somewhat more darkly as a man who uses drugs (at least, he does in the first few years of series) and who exhibits manic depressive traits. Because the episodes largely adhere to the plot and dialogue of Doyle's stories, the Granada series less clearly changes the heroic aspect of the original than other adaptations do. The parallels (sidekick, villain, power) are however still there. At the end of 2009, a new Holmes-adaptation comes in the form of a Hollywood-production directed by Guy Ritchie. In this film, Sherlock is turned rather into an action hero and is typical of the trend in the action genre to be fast-paced, visual, and depict a conflicted hero. *Sherlock Holmes* shows Holmes' weaknesses and especially his lack of social skills, which he overcomes like a true superhero (the superhero is, incidentally, also a trending subject in cinema of the 21st century, and films about it also tend to emphasize the weaknesses of the hero, thus making

him more human). The BBC series *Sherlock*, from 2010, has Benedict Cumberbatch portray not so much an action hero as an anti-hero, or modern hero. These terms are applicable to his character because his weaknesses are also put up for discussion, as is the idea of his being a hero while he seems not to care for others and his mind is his strength as well as his greatest defect. Multiple versions of Holmes as hero co-exist as multiple variations on the hero myth do too – Holmes seems to represent a protagonist who applies in part to all these variations, yet not entirely to *one* in particular. This given also adds to the mystery surrounding Holmes and his ability to be adapted to different eras, as each era chooses a variation of the hero to emphasize or question through Holmes' depiction.

The friendship between Holmes and Watson also changes significantly as adaptations succeed each other. As society demands more equality and also becomes more accepting of previously taboo-subjects such as the homo-erotic subtext between the two characters, Holmes and Watson's relationship becomes increasingly central to the stories. Whereas Watson was, in the 40's, a big, bumbling idiot, he became a more capable friend (80's and 90's) and eventually an equal to Holmes in terms of courage and skills – in 2009/2010 more than ever, it is Watson who saves Holmes from sticky situations.

The changes discernible in the adaptations are not, however, ones that add or remove elements from the stories: rather, the *emphasis* on these elements changes, because both sides of the coin were already present in Doyle. For example, Holmes already had weaknesses as well as strengths in the stories and the friendship consisted of unequal elements (Holmes could be patronising towards Watson) as well as affectionate (occasionally, Holmes would express his appreciation of his good friend). This is what makes Holmes so adaptable so often: Doyle provided readers and future adapters with a large amount of information and consequently with a large array of possibilities, interpretations and options of which different ones speak to different times and generations.

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List of Figures

Figure 1.1: Paget, Sidney. First published in *Strand Magazine* (accompanying Doyle's "Silver Blaze"), December 1892.

Figure 2.1: Still from *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1939). © Twentieth Century Fox.

Figure 3.1: Cover of *Sherlock Holmes*. Comic book. October 1975. © DC Comics.

Figure 3.2: Jeremy Brett in "The Six Napoleons." *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* (1986). © Granada Television.

Figure 4.1: Robert Downey Jr. in *Sherlock Holmes* (2009). Screen capture. © Warner Bros. Pictures.

Figure 4.2: Benedict Cumberbatch in "A Study in Pink." *Sherlock* (2010). © BBC.