

A Scandal in Patriarchy

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's "A Scandal in Bohemia" (1891) follows John Watson as he reunites with Sherlock Holmes and tackles a commission from the King of Bohemia. With the King's engagement endangered by Irene Adler, a past lover threatening to release a picture of their affair, Holmes devises a plan to feign fire in Adler's home with Watson. Assured that he is victorious after seeing her reach for the photograph's hiding place amidst the panic, Holmes is caught off guard when he discovers a letter from Adler the next morning when he searches. She rescinds her previous threat, already long departed after figuring out Holmes's plan. Irene Adler's function in the story, as well as her triumph over Sherlock Holmes and his subsequent, unprecedented respect for a person's brilliance portrays her as an equal to a characteristically intellectually unmatched man, establishing her as a significant embodiment of gender equality.

The forefront of this argument resides on respect from Holmes being a significant compliment that, in turn, awards prestige to Adler. Notably, Watson characterizes Holmes as "loath[ing] every form of society with his whole Bohemian soul" (Doyle 2). Understanding "society" as "association or friendly interaction with other people," Holmes's distaste illustrates how uncharacteristic a positive opinion of anyone is ("Society, n."). Additionally, describing Holmes's "soul" as "Bohemian" classifies the "essential part" of his character as "socially unconventional," further dissociating him from the "society" he refuses to partake in ("Soul, n."; "Bohemian, n. and adj."). Referring to his "soul" specifically also dismisses possibilities that his disgust is a situational trait by applying this aspect to his whole "principle of intelligence, thought, or action," establishing it as a central motive for his behavior ("Soul, n."). Despite this attitude, Holmes still retains the reputation of a respectable, dependable man. The King's initial letter requesting assistance identifies Holmes as "one who may safely be trusted," citing "[his] recent services to one of the Royal Houses of Europe" (Doyle 5). Clarifying some of Holmes's notable past clientele as nobility illustrates the magnitude of trust placed on his name and abilities. The King stating his own trust further explicates the immense regard of Holmes among even the highest members of society, designating Holmes's character as comparably distinguished. Holmes being a man of high esteem gives his opinion likewise social importance; his opinion being uncharacteristic allows rare prestige to his respect for Adler.

Furthermore, Holmes's admiration stemming from her intellectual ability conveys a greater compliment due to his own reputation as a capable detective. In Watson's introduction of Holmes, he described him as "occup[ying] his immense faculties and extraordinary powers of observation in" "clearing up those mysteries, which had been abandoned as hopeless by the official police" (Doyle 2). Watson's praise of Holmes's "immense faculties and extraordinary powers of observation" hold greater impact due to his extended history alongside Holmes, building a level of incomparable familiarity with the detective. Mentioning Holmes's success in cases "abandoned as hopeless by the official police" offers definitive evidence of his greater intelligence, free of any potential bias from the perspective of Watson regarding his close friend. Moreover, when the King initially sheds his disguise as Count Von Kramm, loudly declaring, "'Why should I attempt to conceal it?'," he is met by "'Why, indeed?' murmured [by] Holmes.

‘Your Majesty had not spoken before I was aware’” (Doyle 9, 10). Assigning the definition “to complain in low muttered tones” to “murmured,” Holmes’s repetition of the King denotes itself as mockery, spoken in “low muttered tones” to not blatantly offend, and as annoyance by the “complaining” (“Murmur, v.”). This attitude in response to the King’s drama, paired with his following statement that he already knew the King’s true identity, illustrates Holmes’s refusal to entertain uninspired attempts to intellectually defeat him and impatience for vapid ideas and their originators, even when the originator is the King of Bohemia. Therefore, coming from a man renowned for his cognitive excellence with an intolerance for mental foolishness, an appraisal based on intellect is of utmost esteem. However, there is another notable exception to Holmes’s general disdain for people.

A companionship otherwise unfound in his lonesome profession and lifestyle manifests with John Watson, but this appreciation differs by stemming from affection rather than wit, assigning additional importance to Adler. Upon the King’s arrival, Watson dismisses himself, but Holmes refutes, insisting “[he is] lost without his Boswell” (Doyle 7). Defining “Boswell” as “a constant companion who witnesses and records” elucidates Holmes’s attitude toward Watson (“Boswell, n.”). He does not expect Watson to be outwitting him with plans or deductions as Adler does. He needs Watson just for the company, declaring he would be “lost,” dramatized to “perished or destroyed,” without him, reiterating his attachment as primarily emotional (“Lost, adj.”). In contrast, the first interaction between Holmes and Adler’s legacy after he recognizes her victory is him asking for the photograph of her as payment from the King, “something which [he] should value even more highly” than treasure (Doyle 32). This “value” he assigns to the photograph, translating to Adler, right after her outsmarting him stems from just that: he has finally met an intellectual equal. This distinction signifies that just as Watson is uniquely appreciated by Holmes, so is Adler. Though he regards appreciating people with disdain, especially with his practically unreachable standard for mental capability, Adler becomes the sole exception who earned his approval by natural ability rather than Holmes’s own emotional bias. This prestigious honor being held by Adler then endorses the idea of a woman capable of being on par with Holmes, and therefore, not only equal to man, but equal to a man greater than most men.

Holmes’s focus on the femininity of Irene Adler further proves why she serves as a central figure for gender equality in the Sherlock Holmes universe. The story ends as it begins, reiterating Sherlock’s title for Adler as “The Woman” (Doyle 1, 33). Intentionally including the article “the” characterizes Adler as someone that “there is only one at a time” of in Holmes’s opinion (“The, adj., pron. 2., and n. 1.”). She is of irreplaceable importance to both the story and Holmes because she has earned an unprecedented level of respect from him, a man of great renown who notoriously dismisses his peers. Holmes specifically labeling this esteemed role “woman” draws attention to her gender to emphasize that all his praises can and are attributed to a member of the opposite sex. This title becomes further significant paired with the King’s description of Adler as “[having] the face of the most beautiful of women, and the mind of the most resolute of men” (Doyle 12). By describing her external appearance as feminine and mental

capability as masculine, the King, while complimenting Adler's abilities, simultaneously reinforces patriarchal perspectives on male versus female competency. In contrast, rather than attributing intellectually positive traits to manliness, Holmes's classification of Adler as just "The Woman" defines all aspects of her character to her own femininity, eliminating the misogynistic view that only her beauty is feminine.

Furthermore, this empowerment is not undermined by an antagonistic or romantic role for Adler. Despite being the target of the King's commission, she personally relinquishes any antagonistic function when her letter reassures that "[Holmes's] client may rest in peace," and the King concludes "her word is inviolate" and celebrates a successful end to his case (Doyle 31, 32). From Adler's perspective, associating the King with "rest in peace," a phrase historically connected to the dead, signifies her finality with both him and her threat ("Rest, v. 1."). The King's immediate and complete belief of her promise implies that despite their past grievance, she is originally of a trustworthy nature. By reaching this peaceful resolution, Adler, and by extension, the idea of a woman with great intellectual acuity, is not villainized, but accepted and respected. Additionally, Watson intentionally explicates at the start of the tale that "it was not that [Holmes] felt any emotion akin to love for Irene Adler" (Doyle 1). This eliminates the possibility of Holmes's respect actually being romantic bias; his sentiments are objective and genuinely earned. Furthermore, this lack of passion forbids the high wit of Adler to just be a plot device to define her as a romantic interest fit for the renowned Sherlock Holmes. Her intelligence is not being manipulated as a tool to condemn women or force attraction. Instead, her personality is naturalized as a unique but existent occurrence in the world, just like Holmes's own.

The existence of Adler as Doyle's canon rather than a modern creation of political correctness provides a historical grounding foundation for gender equality. Holmes's distinct, unprecedented appreciation of Adler's wit, attributed with her femininity, in conjunction with the unbiased portrayal of her role in the story all serve to positively highlight the capabilities of women. Adler's victory, paired with its unexpectedness, also speaks volumes about the consequences of underestimating the intelligence of women. Holmes remains prevalent in adaptations as a man typically unmatched in intelligence, save for Irene Adler, providing her and her portrayal of equality relevance in the modern day.

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