

# NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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## Investigating the Female Detective in Victorian and Edwardian Fiction

*Sherlock's Sisters: The British Female Detective 1864-1913*. Joseph A. Kestner, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003. 268pp.

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<1> In *The Sign of Four*, Sherlock Holmes pronounces that he created his profession, that of “the unofficial consulting detective.” Holmes’s assertion reminds us that the nineteenth century saw the professionalization of detection, beginning in earnest with the first formally established plainclothes detective unit of Scotland Yard in 1842. The subsequent invention of the literary detective tradition shadowed, and, in one case, even anticipated, the “real” world as Joseph A. Kestner shows in *Sherlock's Sisters* (2003).

<2> From the 1820s onwards, male detectives appear in fictional narratives that are similar to those in the memoir genre (both genuine and ersatz) by thieves turned thief-takers, Bow Street runners, and police officers. By the early 1860s, these episodic recollections had evolved into the official casebooks of the professional (male) detective, a relatively recent phenomenon. These accounts of detectives’ crime-solving capabilities gratified the growing appetite of a reading public infected with what Wilkie Collins would call “detective fever” in *The Moonstone* (1868). Yet fiction unambiguously anticipated fact in producing the first professional female detectives, characters who predated by twenty years the hiring of women by the Metropolitan Police or Scotland Yard in any capacity and, by over fifty years, women’s employment as detectives.

<3> The nineteenth-century fictional female detective has garnered some scholarly attention in work such as Michele B. Slung’s introduction to *Crime on Her Mind* (1975), Patricia Craig’s and Mary Cadogan’s *The Lady Investigates* (1981), Kathleen Gregory Klein’s *The Woman Detective: Gender and Genre* (1988), and Laura Marcus’ introduction to the collection, *Twelve Women Detective Stories* (1997). Joseph A. Kestner’s critical compendium of Victorian and Edwardian fictional female detectives, *Sherlock's Sisters*, makes an important contribution to this historiography which provides a useful teaching resource as well as a starting point for scholarship in this surprisingly under-researched field.

<4> To the extent that previous studies take in the Victorian period, most of them focus on the late 1880s, when Arthur Conan Doyle’s Holmes launched the golden age of the mystery, a time that also saw the full emergence of the female detective in fiction from 1888-1913. As the title suggests, *Sherlock's Sisters* largely concerns this later time frame, with three out of the four chapters devoted to this period. The first chapter introduces the topic, provides a historical context, establishes a framework that borrows from film theory and narratology, and then examines two texts that feature the earliest professional female detectives: *Revelations of a Lady Detective* (1864) attributed to W.S. Hayward and *The Female Detective* (1864) by Andrew Forrester, Jr. It closes with a discussion of the eponymous heroine of Wilkie Collins’ novella, *The Diary of Anne Rodway* (1856), that leads into an overview of the rest of the book.

<5> The pioneering professional female detectives in fiction, that is, women who identify themselves as detectives and get paid for their work, present a number of challenges for the scholar. First, simply getting access to copies of Hayward’s and Forrester’s mid-Victorian texts (and many of the others that Kestner covers) can be difficult. The cheap production values of these “yellowbacks” (so-called because of the “mustard plaster wrappers” that encased them) made them easily affordable but not especially lasting. The few extant copies can be found only in rare book collections. Their very rarity, as Kestner explains, may be one reason for their obscurity in the canon and in scholarship.

<6> They pose a second problem in terms of literary historiography because of a debate over which of the ground-breaking two came first. Kestner sides with Slung in believing that Hayward’s widowed lady detective, Mrs. Paschal, arrived first; hence her pride of place in this



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chapter. Even though Kestner cites the essay “Female Detectives, Ghost Books, and the Relative Importance of it All,” (1975) in which crime fiction expert E.F. Bleiler definitively establishes the status of “G,” a.k.a Miss Gladden, Forrester’s female detective, as the literary foremother he does not seem to have taken Bleiler’s evidence into account. His confusion may arise from Craig and Cadogan’s erroneous claim that one of the British Library copies has a book stamp dated 1861, but the point can be clarified by looking at the *Publisher’s Weekly Circular*, which shows that the publication of *The Female Detective* preceded *Revelations of a Lady Detective* by six months.

<7> The third and, arguably, most important scholarly problem is gauging the significance of these two quite anomalous texts. It should be said that Kestner’s book does not problematize the question of the origins of the professional female detective. In contrast to their male counterparts in fiction of the 1860s, there are neither actual nor fictional precedents for “G” or Mrs. Paschal. True, Collins’ Anne Rodway pieces together clues and sticks to the task of finding her friend’s murderer with a skill and determination comparable to that exhibited by the paid professionals who followed. Although some critics designate her “the first female detective,” Anne Rodway does not identify herself or her activities in those terms. Elsewhere, in reference to other female characters like her, Kestner hedges with frequent use of “detectival” as a descriptor. But in the section on Anne Rodway, Kestner looks at her disadvantaged position as a woman in relation to the law rather than her detectival activities, so her inclusion in this introductory chapter is puzzling.

<8> Kestner might have identified an earlier and more direct precursor in Charles Dickens’ characterization of Mrs. Bucket in *Bleak House* (1852-3), “a lady of a natural detective genius, which if it had been improved by professional exercise, might have done great things, but which has paused at the level of a clever amateur.” Dickens writes almost as if “professional exercise” of detective genius had been an option for Mrs. Bucket. Forrester and Hayward likewise assume that women can have such aptitudes and that could lead to professional employment. These latter writers take it as a matter of course that there should be female detectives, as is indicated when Forrester’s “G” introduces what amounts to her defense of detection (not just female detection) as a valuable profession: “Criminals are both masculine and feminine[...] and therefore it follows that the necessary detectives should be of both sexes” (quoted in Kestner 11).

<9> It is easy to elide the problem by assuming that, like the female franchise, the idea of female detectives was in the air but slow to materialize. Yet, what *Sherlock’s Sisters* does not address is the dissonance between the commonsense assumptions on which Forrester and Hayward’s texts are predicated and the real-life paucity of opportunities. Nor does Kestner discuss distinctions between the imagined professional identities of these earliest fictional female detectives and the non-professional identities of their amateur, one might say, accidentally “detectival” female counterparts. Both avenues of exploration might lead to a more fruitful understanding of these groundbreaking characters, which Kathleen Klein calls “anomalies.” Instead, Kestner presents the contiguous historical context in order to suggest that these female detectives function as fantasies of female empowerment that coincide with the widespread debates over the so-called “woman question” and the property rights of married women in second half of the nineteenth century. For Kestner, part of this fantasy derives from the way the female detective in the course of solving crimes returns the male gaze, thus placing the male suspect and, by extension, the patriarchy under surveillance. The self-sufficiency of these groundbreaking female detectives—one refuses to identify her marital status at all, the other is widowed— and their devotion to professional rather than domestic life combines with this empowering gaze to make them transgressive figures.

<10> As intriguing as what stimulated Forrester and Hayward’s imaginative leap into female detection is the question of what accounts for the subsequent twenty-four year gap between the “first wave” of female detectives and the next one. While Kestner does not address the absence, he does suggest reasons for the “renaissance” (25) of the fictional female detective in the later nineteenth century; chiefly, a series of events starting with the evidence of police corruption in the 1877 Turf Fraud Scandal and the subsequent 1878 reorganization that separated detectives from constables and placed the former in the newly established Criminal Investigation Department (C.I.D.). From these events Kestner somewhat loosely extrapolates “Since all these individuals were male, the result was that cultural observers may well have speculated about the department and its honesty if women had been part of the official order” (25). Similarly, Kestner argues that the scandalous failure of both the Metropolitan Police and Scotland Yard to solve the Jack the Ripper murders in 1888 made “it clear to everyone that the males involved in enforcement and investigation had failed. Hence, there is a certain suitability to the appearance of Miriam Lee

investigation had raised. In any case, there is a certain suitability to the appearance of William Lee as female detective in Merrick's *Mr. Bazalgette's Agent* published the same year as the occurrence of the unsolved Ripper murders" (26). Kestner then points to the publication of two books that propelled the renewed proliferation of detective fiction: Fergus Hume's *The Mystery of the Hansom Cab* (1886) and Conan Doyle's first Sherlock Holmes mystery *A Study in Scarlet* (1887). These, along with journals like *The Strand* (established in 1891) sparked a fresh outpouring of detective fiction, much of which comprised new incarnations of the female detective.

<11> In the next two chapters, organized chronologically, Kestner looks at the late-Victorian female detective in the fiction of 1888-1894 and 1897-1900. He then turns to the Edwardian female detective and covers the period to 1913. In these three chapters, Kestner brings developments in the publishing industry, the impact of current events, and the rise of the "New Woman" to bear on his discussion of fifteen different series or novels involving professional female detectives or their amateur counterparts. Kestner's examination of New Woman novelists like Grant Allen, whose two contributions to this genre were *Miss Cayley's Adventures* (1899) and *Hilda Wade* (1900), is especially acute as is his analysis of Marie Belloc Lowndes' reworking (and solving) of the Ripper murders in her 1913 novel *The Lodger*.

<12> The early, rather cursory use of Laura Mulvey and Ann Kaplan's theoretical work on the gaze seems to fall away as the study progresses and Kestner concentrates on the lives and works of writers who were hugely popular among their contemporaries, but much less well-known today. Given the obscurity of many of these texts, the biographical information and critically-inflected, detailed plot summaries he provides should prove helpful for students and researchers alike. The individual chapters would work well in the classroom, although the repetition of some materials between the chapters makes the book as a whole a little less useful.

<13> Early in *Revelations of a Lady Detective*, the heroine Mrs. Paschal enigmatically discusses the circumstances that lead to her becoming "one of the much-dreaded but little known people called Female Detectives." Thanks to Joseph A. Kestner's extensive work, this acquaintance has been much improved.



