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## Dissimulation And The Detecting Eye: Female Masculinity In “A Scandal In Bohemia”

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<1>In *A Magazine of Her Own?* Margaret Beetham contends that it “would be impossible to write a ... history of magazines which defined men in terms of their masculinity” (*A Magazine of Her Own?* 3). Hilary Fraser, Stephanie Green, and Judith Johnston’s response, that “Beetham’s statement signals the extent to which ideological significations of the masculine are, at times, so paradigmatic as to seem invisible,” motivates them to analyze magazines that addressed male aesthetes in terms of their masculinity (175). Beetham, Fraser, Green, and Johnston consider masculinity or, more accurately, masculinities, to be properties of men alone. My response to Beetham’s contention is built on Judith Halberstam’s refusal “to hold female masculinity apart from the making of modern masculinity itself” (46). Her insistence on historicizing gender expression is critical to understanding the change in gender expression over time. Fin-de-siècle gender discourse was driven by anxiety about masculine women and feminine men. As the variations on normative femininity and masculinity (from the New Woman to the aesthete) attest, the late Victorians recognized a multiplicity of gender expressions. Indeed, fin-de-siècle magazines intended for the “common man,” such as George Newnes’s sixpenny monthly *The Strand*, serialized fiction representing both male and female masculinity (Beetham, “Agony Aunt” 254). Variant gender performance, as Marjorie Garber has noted, is often dismissed as a disguise undertaken in pursuit of a particular end (70). Taking as its case study a story published in *The Strand* in which disguise and performance are central thematics, this paper illustrates how representations of non-normative gender expression allow us to see through the cracks in normative rationalizations of cross-dressing. Reading Arthur Conan Doyle’s “A Scandal in Bohemia” through the theoretical concepts coined by gender and sexuality studies shows that the masculine woman,

whether cross-dressed or not, had the power to intervene in men's homosocial relations.

<2>Despite their representation of gender variance, Victorians did not have a readily available set of terms for sex and gender disguise, nor do we have satisfactory language today. The language—and therefore the meanings—that we use to describe various forms of gender performance was coined after the Sherlock Holmes stories first appeared in *The Strand*. Sexologists coined the term *transvestite* in 1928 to describe individuals (usually men) who derived sexual pleasure from wearing clothing associated with the opposite sex. The term *cross-dresser* emerged in the 1950s to describe someone who, without sexual motives, dressed in clothes that connote the opposite sex. Inasmuch as it is possible to use these two anachronistic terms, this paper is concerned with cross-dressing, or what I will call *dissimulation*. Dissimulation suggests the intention to deceive—all of the characters taken up in this paper cross dress as a disguise—rather than the desire for sexual gratification or to express transsexual self-identity.<sup>(1)</sup> The term dissimulation connotes both simulation and similarity: the dissimulator imitates gender as performed elsewhere, which, in turn, assumes an audience, or readers, who are familiar with the gendered code that the dissimulator cites. Irene Adler dissimulates when she uses men's clothing as a disguise. While dissimulating she dresses as a man, but continues to self-identify as a woman. However, she is a *masculine* woman at all times, whether she is in disguise or not. Her masculinity, I argue, *is* masculinity, not a disguise, while her dissimulation is a calculated performance for an audience.

<3>Before turning to the often-ignored figure of the heterosexual masculine woman in “A Scandal in Bohemia,” I will argue for the utility of applying language coined by gender and sexuality studies to gender variance in periodical fiction. The plot of “A Scandal in Bohemia” is impelled by unconventional pairings of sex and gender. As we will see, the story resolves itself through the reestablishment of cisgendered norms; however, the very inclusion of a character who identifies as woman, but passes as a man, highlights the instability of those norms. *Cisgendered*, a label coined to provide a binary opposite to the term *transgendered*, offers scholars the critical vocabulary to parse markers of sustained gender expression, as opposed to temporary dissimulation, in the text.

<4>Extending Halberstam's disarticulation of female masculinity from lesbianism, I aim to disambiguate sex from sexuality and gender, particularly in the case of the normative, or cisgendered, articulation. Recent scholarship in gender studies has identified four axes along which gender is formed: sex (female to male continuum), gender role (masculine to feminine continuum), self-defined gender identity (man to

woman continuum), and sexual orientation (homosexual to heterosexual continuum) (Lev 97). This model's primary theoretical advantage comes from its separation of sex from gender identity. For example, this model distinguishes people with female bodies, who are masculine, and identify as women, from people with female bodies, who are masculine, and identify as men.

<5>Cisgendered people's gender roles and identities conform to the social expectations attendant on their perceived sex. Males who identify and pass as men and females who identify and pass as women are cisgendered. Whereas the cisgender concept is rarely addressed explicitly in literary or historical criticism, popular and medical studies of gender have adopted it with less hesitation.<sup>(2)</sup> The cisgender concept moves one step beyond the "oversimplified and invested" categorization of sex and gender to articulate what is not yet "thinkable within the existing gender economies and lexicons" (Noble 164). Identity, sex, and behaviour cannot always be disentangled, but, as Judith Butler reminds her readers, attempts at disentanglement do offer insight into gender's construction (173). Although we ought to be wary of the four-component model's performative power to produce the objects that it names, these four categories also offer us the tools to identify various gendering processes in fiction.

### **Visible Relations: Gender, Homosociality, and the Periodical Press**

<6>In Doyle's "A Scandal in Bohemia," disguise disturbs clothing's conventional function as an unambiguous marker of gender, sex, age, and class. Wilhelm von Ormstein, the ill-disguised king of Bohemia, wears a mask when he first appeals to Holmes to thwart Irene Adler's villainous attempt at blackmail. The King's failure to effectively disguise his age, sex, or class allows Holmes to identify him almost immediately. Holmes himself manipulates the sartorial indicators of class and age: first he disguises himself as a groom and then as an elderly parson. Irene Adler's cross-dressing, through which she exploits Holmes's expectation about the appearance of the sexed body, is the only disguise that goes unrecognized in "A Scandal in Bohemia." Doyle focuses cultural anxiety about reading the sexed body through Irene Adler's disguise as a young man, a disguise that troubles the assumption that reading clothing, or indeed reading gender, will necessarily assist sex detection.

<7>It is Adler's dissimulation, and not her gender role (i.e. her masculinity), that unsettles both Holmes and the reader. The deception inherent in dissimulation distinguishes dissimulation from the gender roles manifest in sustained habitual gender expression. Adler's male costume does not signal that she identifies as a man, but

instead provides a means for her to move about London with the freedom enjoyed by middle-class youths. Adler's masculinity is more fixed than her disguise; she does not cast off her gender role as she does her suit of gent's clothing.

<8>“A Scandal in Bohemia,” which appeared with illustrations by Sidney Paget in *The Strand's* inaugural issue in July 1891, invites an interpretation of the way that the conventions of periodical production shaped the representation of non-conventional gender expression. As Sally Ledger argues, the textual production of gender types “is just as ‘real’ and historically significant” as the “minutiae of ... material existence” (3). The textual production of gender does not happen in a vacuum, but rather is in response to broader exigencies of each periodical's style. Specifically, the conventions of British New Journalism—investigative reporting, sensation, bold headlines, lively illustrations, specials, and celebrity interviews (Brake and Codell 1-7)—make periodicals that embraced New Journalism's style the perfect home for illustrated detective stories. Journals such as *The Pall Mall Gazette*, *The Strand*, and *The Star* featured, to quote from a contemporary journal, *The New Review*, an “easy personal style, that trick of bright and colloquial language, that wealth of intimate and picturesque detail, and that determination to arrest, amuse, or startle” (Phillipps 182). The determination to arrest and startle the reader with a variety of perspectives came to shape what Margaret Beetham calls “radical heterogeneity” of the late Victorian periodical press (*A Magazine of Her Own* 11).

<9>A number of men shaped the visualist production of gender in “A Scandal in Bohemia.” As Linda Hughes and Michael Lund note, it takes multiple people to produce the impression of a periodical's unified corporate voice (9). The gendered content in “A Scandal in Bohemia” has no single author, since the visual elements provided by Sidney Paget's illustrations, Arthur Conan Doyle's descriptions, and George Newnes' arrangement of the images and text, all shape the production of textual gender. In order to address the effect that Paget, Doyle, and Newnes produce, I will extend Lisa Surridge and Mary Elizabeth Leighton's hypothesis about the Victorian periodical reader's “knowledge of inter-pictoriality” (71) to my discussion of the interplay of verbal imagery, pictorial images, and unified layout in *The Strand*.

<10>*The Strand* readers who fell outside the dominant gender, sex, and sexuality categories had to take on a double consciousness in order to engage with the periodical. “The sixpenny reader,” Beetham reminds us, “was simultaneously defined as ‘the common man’ or ‘Everyman’ and located very specifically in terms of nation, class and gender [sic]” (“Agony Aunt” 254), which is to say that monthly magazines like *The Strand* addressed readers as if they belonged to the dominant subject position, at the

same time dividing readers between magazines based on sex, class, and nationality. Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories, for example, fit naturally in *The Strand*, since the text and images interpellate the reader into a male, normatively masculine, middle-class, white, law-abiding subject position. *The Strand* required dual positioning of any individual who was not the model reader. This dual positioning was akin to what W. E. B. DuBois' termed the "unreconciled ideals" of a double consciousness: the disenfranchised view themselves both through their own subject position and through the eyes of those in the dominant subject position (10). Theories of cisgender and transgender identity illuminate the ways that the double consciousness can answer back, sometimes with impertinence, in the very journals whose editorial voice addresses the common man alone.

<11>The late nineteenth-century periodical press framed the common man and the common woman quite differently. One of the effects of the burgeoning late-century periodical market was the increased commodification of women. Femininity and financial standing were often articulated in tandem in the periodical press; indeed, the "commodification of the feminine may... be seen as central, if problematic, to the creation of women as cultural players and as consumers themselves" (Fraser, Green, and Johnston 174). Irene Adler, the antagonist in "A Scandal in Bohemia," fails to perform ideal femininity: neither flighty nor passive, she is also unavailable to be won by competing suitors, even those who are as rational, active, and competitive as Holmes. Neither Adler's body, nor her gender, is a commodity.

<12>In western narratives, and indeed in the lived world, women are not solely commodities; they play a central non-economic role in men's self-fashioning. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick challenges the binary that opposes friendship between men and sexual intimacy between men. She proposes a homosocial continuum to explain historically specific "pattern[s] of male friendship, mentorship, entitlement, rivalry, and hetero- and homosexuality" (*Between Men* 1). Women factor into men's relationships with one another most frequently, Sedgwick argues, as tokens of exchange, be it to forge the relationship between a cuckolded husband and a lover, a husband and a father-in-law, or two rivals for a woman's affection. Sedgwick calls these groupings, in which two men's desire for one another is mediated through a woman, "erotic triangles" (Sedgwick 21). The erotic triangle lets men indulge in their desire for one another without incurring the homophobic sanctions that would accompany direct physical contact. Gender studies scholars have yet to consider what occurs when the sex of the members of these triangles is dissimulated, as it is in "A Scandal in Bohemia."

<13>In order to deduce fictional characters' sex readers must rely on description,

pronouns, and illustration. Clothing and the sexed body, whether cisgendered or otherwise, operates like the box in which Schrödinger placed his apocryphal cat. One has to open the metaphorical box to reveal a character's sex. Schrödinger's thought experiment, which illustrates the uncertainty principle in quantum theory, posits that a cat placed in a box with a poison that may or may not be released, is, before anyone looks in the box, both simultaneously alive and dead. It is only after the box is opened that the cat's condition resolves into one state or the other. Textual representations of gender operate in a similar way: a character may be described using masculine pronouns throughout a story only to turn out to be a female in disguise. One has to open the metaphorical box—in this case, textual gender made up of illustrations, descriptions, and pronouns—to reveal the character's sex. Readers must remember, however, that textual sex and gender are all surface. There is no sexed body under the description: our hypothetical dissimulating character is not a woman until she is described as one.

<14>As in Schrödinger's uncertainty principle (which insists that you cannot generalize the outcome of his experiment) you cannot open just one box, you have to open all of them. Thus, plot turns meant to restore the cisgendered alignment of sex and gender have a paradoxically unsettling effect. In stories that centre on dissimulation, once readers discover that they had incomplete information about one character, they may suspect that they have incomplete information about all characters. Gender paranoia can spread throughout the text: for example, Sherlock Holmes could have been female all along, but readers were never given clues that would disclose her sex. The revelation of dissimulation also has a peculiar temporal effect on the interpretation of the text. Readers must retroactively assign a fictively stable sex to the story's characters. Assigning a new sex to the memory of a body ("she was a woman *all along*") supports the fallacy of essentialized sex and gender, both in fiction and in daily life.

<15>Doyle's initial descriptions and Paget's illustrations may lead readers to assume that all the characters in "A Scandal" are cisgendered, that is to say that the biological males identify as men, are masculine, and heterosexual, and that the biological females identify as women, are feminine, and heterosexual. Irene Adler, however, is not cisgendered. Even when she is wearing women's clothing, Adler is still a *masculine* heterosexual woman, in part, as we will see, because she evades the sexual commodification common to most middle-class Victorian women. Adler provides a distinction between the categories that make up gender specificity. Dissimulation and non-cisgendered self-expressions are distinct from one another. Adler's masculinity remains consistent throughout the story, and, in conjunction with her dissimulation, or optional disguise, disrupts the erotic triangles on which the male characters'

homosocial relations are built.

### **Bohemian Rivals: Erotic Triangles, Dissimulation and Female Masculinity**

<16>The central erotic rivalry in “A Scandal in Bohemia” is between Sherlock Holmes and Wilhelm von Ormstein, the titular king of Bohemia. For Holmes and von Ormstein Adler supplies the “compulsory and double-edged involvement of [a] wom[a]n in all male homosocial bonds [in] the absence of direct genital contact between men” (Sedgwick, *Between Men* 63). She is central to the two men’s rivalrous bond—a bond that lets Holmes perpetually best the King. The outcome of the rivalry will be determined by each man’s ability to use his mind, rather than his muscle, to retrieve a photograph from Irene Adler. Holmes is poised to win in this erotic competition with the King, not simply because he is more astute, but because he has set the grounds –wit— on which the competition will take place. At their first meeting von Ormstein explains why he has come to Holmes in person, rather than sending a member of his entourage. The secret of his former sexual relationship with Adler is so politically dangerous that the King “could not confide it to an agent without putting [him]self in [the agent’s] power” (15). Although he has avoided confessing his secret to his staff, the King is now completely in Holmes’s power. Even though Holmes does not take advantage of this new knowledge to blackmail the King, Holmes does prove his superiority through insouciance: while von Ormstein is “all anxiety,” Holmes is perfectly content to find that he has three days to prevent the scandal, since he has “one or two matters of [greater] importance to look into just at present” (16). When the King expresses regret at the social difference that prevents him from marrying Adler, a woman who “was not on my level,” Holmes’s reply mocks von Ormstein’s intelligence: “from what I have seen of the lady she seems, indeed, to be on a very different level to your Majesty” (24). Holmes’s acuity, not as a detective, but as a conversationalist, establishes his dominance over the King.

<17>The illustrations in “A Scandal in Bohemia” reinforce the King’s inferiority to his British rival. Three of the six illustrations of characters in disguise that accompany “A Scandal in Bohemia” look like fashion plates from periodicals like the *Queen Magazine* or *The English Woman’s Domestic Magazine*, in which the figures stand in rather stagey poses, with only sketchy outlines of the background to suggest the scene. The illustrations of the flamboyant king and Holmes in disguise as a groom and as a parson invite the reader to consider their clothes without the distracting context of a street scene or domestic interior ([Figure 1](#); [Figure 2](#)). The King, dressed in his usual manner, but wearing a mask, draws a critique from Watson that is reminiscent of the descriptive texts that appear alongside fashion plates in women’s magazines:

His dress was rich with a richness that would, in England, be looked upon as akin to bad taste. Heavy bands of Astrakahn were slashed across the sleeves and fronts of his double-breasted coat, while the deep blue cloak which was thrown over his shoulders was lined with flame-coloured silk and secured at the neck with a brooch which consisted of a single flaming beryl. Boots which extended halfway up his calves, and which were trimmed at the tops with rich brown fur, completed the impression of barbaric opulence which was suggested by his whole appearance. (14)

<18>Watson makes his opprobrium conditional upon being in England, but his feeble attempt at softening his critique is immediately exposed: the King *is* in England. Von Ormstein's costume is outré in comparison to the dark and undecorated attire that indicates manly rationality and sobriety in England. Watson's commentary is a yardstick against which *The Strand's* male readers can measure their own worth in the sartorial economy. The misogyny and xenophobia that underlies Watson's commentary on the King's feminized clothing enlists the male readers' approbation through flattery. This flattery camouflages *The Strand's* construction of masculinity through the reader's paranoia about incipient femininity in men. It lets the readers engage in the paranoid affirmation that they would never dress in such a feminized or un-English manner.

<19>Watson does not critique Holmes's disguises, even when they make him look wan or indigent, or in any other way prevent him from living up to the strictures of ideal middle-class masculinity. Holmes evades critique because, unlike the King, his clothing is not the reflection of permanently imperfect masculinity. Holmes's disguises are, as is the case with all dissimulation, only temporary. Watson's amazement belies his admiration:

It was close upon four before the door opened, and a drunken-looking groom, ill-kempt and side-whiskered, with an inflamed face and disreputable clothes, walked into the room. Accustomed as I was to my friend's amazing powers in the use of disguises, I had to look three times before I was certain that it was indeed he. With a nod he vanished into the bedroom, whence he emerged in five minutes tweed-suited and respectable, as of old. (17)

Holmes is, however, more like the King than Watson's adulations imply. Holmes, like the King, is thoroughly taken with Adler. To Holmes, Adler "eclipses and predominates the whole of her sex" (11). Holmes and Von Ormstein's homosocial rivalry over her is founded on the two men's similarity, which *The Strand* frames in terms of nationality. In

the second paragraph of the story, before the royal client has even been introduced, Watson describes Holmes's "Bohemian soul," suggesting that the story's title refers to Holmes as much as it does to the Germanic state (11). The real bohemian scandal is the warmth of Holmes's feeling for the blackmailer.

<20>Holmes fails to win Adler through his rivalry with the King, not because the King is the victor, but because Adler has positioned herself outside the traffic in women that underpins male homosociality. Holmes, in disguise as a groom, acts as witness at Adler's wedding to her lawyer, Godfrey Norton. In the illustration that accompanies the text the full background is drawn in, and the faces of the characters are either in profile or quarter view. Therefore, the reader is in the same position as a passerby on the street, who lacks the proper vantage to interrogate the disguise (Figure 3). This replicates the effect of extra-textual dissimulation since, without the benefit of foreknowledge, it is quite difficult to recognize that a dissimulator is trying to pass as someone else. Holmes's citation of the class-based cues of a groom's standard attire shows that it is possible to re-align oneself on the performative axis of class, and perhaps even gender role and gender identity – those three ever-important markers of the "common man."

<21>Holmes in disguise acts as a "common man" in two senses while watching another man, Godfrey Norton, claim Adler, the prize which, according to the economy of men's erotic rivalry, Holmes ought to have won following his verbal sparring with the King. Disguised as a groom, Holmes is pressed into service as a witness to the wedding. As Holmes says "I was half-dragged up to the altar, and before I knew where I was I found myself mumbling responses which were whispered in my ear, and vouching for things of which I knew nothing" (19). Holmes's disguise evinces the reliance of dissimulators on existing classed and gendered codes of behaviour. Norton needs one man, any common man, to stand in as a witness. Holmes's particularity (as *the* witness) is essential. It is his dissimulation, however, which makes him indistinguishable from other grooms, that gets him close enough to Norton and Adler to stand up as part of their wedding party, as a groom if not as *the* bridegroom. Dissimulation allows the disguised individual to pass in and out of focus, as it were, oscillating between being one of the crowd and being a particular person.

<22>For a dissimulator to pass as a common man, viewers must, as Holmes says of Watson, "see, but ... not observe"(12). Notably, viewers must not think that there is any passing going on at all, in order for the dissimulator to pass successfully. Onlookers' citation of a dissimulator's failure to pass in the past is a frequent, if fallacious, test of dissimulators' ability to perform the gender conventionally associated with the other

sex, since onlookers cannot know how many dissimulators they have met without note. Adler, for example, is an excellent dissimulator who passes as a youth without exciting comment. Her dissimulation, however, is not a sign that she identifies as a man. She identifies as a woman and merely dresses as a man. Her fixed position on the gender identity continuum (self-identification as a woman) is separate from her position on the gender role continuum (which spans masculine to feminine behaviour).

<23>Within moments of the King and Holmes's first sparring match over Adler, readers are left uncertain of Adler's position on the biological, or indeed, the ontological continuum. Holmes asks Watson to find Adler in the index of clippings "concerning men and things" that the detective has collected from newspapers and periodicals (16). Readers are left to wonder whether Adler will turn out to be a man or a thing. In the Sherlock Holmes stories, the newspaper is often the source of unmediated truth, which Holmes can use to solve a case before interviewing anyone involved in the mystery, as he does in "The Boscombe Valley Mystery" and in "The Adventure of the Noble Bachelor." Appearing in *The Strand*, "A Scandal in Bohemia" gains the truth-value supplied by the veracity of the periodical press in the Holmes stories. "A Scandal in Bohemia" suggests Irene Adler may turn out to be a man, provided she turns out not to be a thing.

<24>Whatever Adler's ontological status, she is certainly not a good that can be bought, a *thing* in the capitalist sense, nor does she engage in the feminine heterosexual commerce that renders women's bodies *things*, or commodities. As Fraser, Green and Johnston note, "the trope of the feminine as a mode of exchange was not ... merely confined to the woman's magazine" (173); indeed, we find it in mixed audience periodicals like *The Strand*. If in erotic triangles the female body is a token of exchange between men, then instances where woman-identified characters evade their role signal that they may not be aligned on all four components of the gender continuum in a cisgendered way.

<25>Holmes makes the mistake of thinking that Adler is a thing, a woman whose only worth is her beautiful body. He does not read past an ostler's report that Adler "is the daintiest *thing* under a bonnet on this planet" (emphasis added 18); however, she is only a *thing* so long as she seems to fulfill a woman's traditional role within an erotic triangle. Even if she does not take on new biological traits (as in the male to female continuum), she is the opposite of a thing, according to Holmes's classification "of men and things," when she masquerades as a man.

<26>Adler's masculinity and transformation into a youth disrupt the conventions of

erotic triangles in two ways. First, Adler's masculinity, dramatized by her refusal to use her body to engage in feminine heterosexual commerce, prevents Holmes from claiming her as his prize. Second, as a youth she is free to enter into homosocial relations with other men, in order to compete over cisgendered women (or over women like herself, who pass as cisgendered). Adler's arrangement of her own marriage, with no regard for dueling suitors, is a further sign of her masculinity. While Holmes and von Ormstein have been engaged in a homosocial struggle over Adler, she has negotiated her own marriage to Norton, who is oblivious to Holmes and the King, and does not use Adler to enter into homosocial relations with any other men in the story. Adler's marriage, in the absence of an erotic triangle between suitors, or between her husband and father, marks her as distinct from cisgendered women who are feminine enough to be commodified as part of men's homosocial exchange.

<27>Adler's relationship to money also excludes her from the standard economic dimension of straight women's sexual expression. The two modes in which women used their bodies as economic goods for exchange were familiar to every Victorian reader. Female characters were often cast either as good (as in the case of a wife) or bad (as in the case of a sex worker). The reified wife and sex worker exist on the same continuum since both exchange their bodies for material gain. The use of sex to attain financial security, while perhaps more overt in the case of the sex worker, was no less a motivator for women who, with few job prospects in the nineteenth century, often only had sex and reproduction to offer in exchange for the material and financial comforts of marriage. When Holmes suggests that von Ormstein "must pay... The [damning photograph] must be bought," the despairing King replies that Adler "will not sell," since her only goal is to ruin the King (16). She refuses to exploit her past sexual relations with the King for money. Adler's refusal of money in exchange for her silence about her past relationship with the King places her outside of heterosexual women's standard commerce in sex.

<28>Holmes repeatedly confuses biological sex with gender roles. He assumes, based on an essentialist conception of sex-based behaviour, that Adler will show him where she has hidden the photograph: "When a woman thinks her house is on fire, her instinct is at once to rush to the thing which she values most. It is a perfectly overpowering impulse" Holmes informs Watson, as though biology dictates all gendered behaviour (22). Although Adler does show Holmes where she has hidden the photograph, Holmes cannot predict most of her behaviour by resorting to assumptions about her sex. Irene Adler is not cisgendered – she is not driven by the culturally conditioned gendered behaviour for women that Holmes mistakes for an effect of biology. Adler is biologically female, but her masculinity undermines the ideological assumption that gendered

behaviour is dependent on sex.

<29>Adler's most significant disruption of the typical erotic triangle does not come from her masculinity, but from her dissimulation. Adler has relationships with men that do not conform to the social conventions for relations between men and women. Holmes recognizes her potential for unconventional relations with men, but then appears to forget it almost instantly. He wonders aloud whether Adler is Norton's "client, his friend, or his mistress... If [she] is the former," he muses "she [has] probably transferred the photograph to his keeping. If the latter, it [is] less likely" (18). Holmes disregards the possibility that Adler might have male friends almost as soon as he has suggested it. Holmes deduces that Adler's relationship to Norton is sexual when he sees Norton brush "past the maid who opened the door [to Adler's villa] with the air of a man who was thoroughly at home" (18). The threshold serves as a sexual metaphor that men cross in order to enter into the feminine domestic sphere. Holmes attempts to replicate this sexualized familiarity when he "push[es] past [Adler's] servant, and rush[es] into the drawing room" only to find a note revealing that Adler was the youth that Holmes had met on *his* doorstep the preceding night (24).

<30>Adler manages to pass as a man while simultaneously seeing through Holmes's disguise. At his front door, still dressed as a clergyman, Holmes

was searching his pockets for the key, when someone passing said: --  
'Good-night, Mister Sherlock Holmes.' ... the greeting appeared to have  
come from a slim youth in an ulster who had hurried by. 'I've heard that voice  
before,' said Holmes, staring dimly into the street 'Now, I wonder who the  
deuce that could have been.' (23)

The youth, unbeknownst to Holmes or the reader, is Adler in disguise ([Figure 4](#)). This passage leads one to ask, when does the youth become Adler? Only retrospectively can Holmes and the reader reconstruct their memory of the scene, forcing Adler into a woman's place on the gender identity continuum, and thereby resolving the mystery. However, during the encounter on Holmes's doorstep the youth *is not* Adler in disguise. There is no gendered subterfuge until later in the story: at the moment the youth addresses Holmes, the youth is just a young man, not a woman. As the moment that Irene Adler reveals her dissimulation, the reader must go back and remember (or re-member) her by changing the recollection of the youth into the recognition of a woman in disguise as a man.

<31>Irene Adler's remarkable mind is another sign of her masculinity. The King

pronounces that Irene Adler has a “soul of steel...and the mind of the most resolute of men” (16). Holmes’s expostulation (“who the deuce”) attests to his unease at failing to recognize the youth who strolled past his front door. While the word “deuce” euphemistically refers to the devil, its earliest meaning suggests a double or something represented by the number two (“Deuce”). Adler is a representation of the devilish hybrid that was central to fin-de-siècle gender discourse: she is a woman with a man’s mind. Significantly, she goes undetected by the great detective. Ronald Thomas has argued that “the detective’s unique talent is the uncanny ability to see what no one else can see” (134). When Holmes fails, the reader can no longer trust the professional detective to consistently resolve the story and reestablish the cisgendered norms. Indeed, the reader recognizes that Holmes would have been thoroughly unaware of Adler’s disguise had she not voluntarily confessed to it. Adler’s skill at disguise heightens the reader’s fear that bodies may pass between gender identities without detection.

<32>In erotic triangles women are either symbolically or physically exchanged in order to cement men’s homosocial bonds; however, dissimulating women evade the erotic triangle and interfere with the mechanics of men’s homosocial bonds. Furthermore, through dissimulation women can enter into erotic triangles as men, if they so choose. Dissimulation disrupts the homosocial exchange: a woman dressed as man can instigate an erotic rivalry over her absent female self between her dissimulated manly persona and any man who is taken in by her disguise. There is room for further critical inquiry here —albeit critical inquiry which “A Scandal in Bohemia” only supports through speculation: the youth who spoke to Holmes at his doorstep could have engaged the detective in an erotic rivalry over Adler, just as Holmes engaged the King in an erotic rivalry despite Adler’s absence. Instead of forming a conventional erotic triangle that would allow the youth and Holmes to enact homosocial desire without genital contact, this hypothetical rivalry with the youth would bring Holmes into an erotic pairing that would reveal the tenuous homophobic and misogynist underpinning of male homosociality.

### **Conclusion**

<33>In “A Scandal in Bohemia” the revelation that characters have been in disguise is meant to neutralize the anxiety caused by the thought that dissimulators might pass with impunity. Revelation does not, however, nullify the threat to male homosociality posed by men and women who are not cisgendered along the masculine to feminine continuum. When reading a text it is impossible to know who is a dissimulator until the moment of revelation. Although it may be comforting for the reader to be able to re-

inscribe the memory of the dissimulator with a new sex (“*she was a woman all along*”), the re-inscription does nothing to dispel the fear that there may be gender non-conformists that go unnoticed, even by a coolly rational masculine detective. “A Scandal in Bohemia” might offer gender detection as a tool to resolve gender ambiguity, but even *The Strand* cannot ensure a cisgendered ending when confronted by the passerby who *passes*.

<34>A close reading of Irene Adler’s dissimulation and gender role in “A Scandal in Bohemia” confirms Judith Halberstam’s insistence that masculinity in women before 1900 is not just proto-lesbianism waiting for the identity to be named. She points out that such thinking denies the historical specificity of desire, and leans on too-neat categories of sexual deviance (Halberstam 46). Halberstam, however, ignores masculine women who derive gratification from sexual relations with men. The masculine heterosexual woman continues to outside the reach of critical commentary.

<35> “A Scandal in Bohemia” shows us that non-normative configurations of sex, gender, sexuality, and self-defined gender identity cannot simply be rationalized away. For Irene Adler, dissimulation is an occasional pleasure, but both her heterosexuality and her particular expression of masculinity are fixed, no matter what she is wearing. As Adler tells Holmes and the reader, “male costume is nothing new to me. I often take advantage of the freedom which it gives” (24). Adler’s assertion is contained in a note addressed to Holmes, positioning him as a reader alongside the readers of the story. Just like the reader, Holmes is reliant on the writer to give over all the information that would expose the lack of normative cisgendered congruity. Adler does not supply any further information. She lets Holmes, and by extension the reader, imagine what freedom, or indeed, liberties, she and other dissimulators indulge in. Dissimulators like Adler cut through the commercialized representations of women typical of fin-de-siècle periodicals addressed to the common man. Attention to dissimulation in “A Scandal in Bohemia” confronts the reader with the fact that late Victorians recognized a variety of gender expressions, many of which, like the masculine heterosexual woman, evade detection, even by contemporary scholars.

Figures



Figure. 1. The King of Bohemia, pen, ink, and wash from Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Original Illustrated Sherlock Holmes* (Secaucus, NJ: Castle Books, 1979; 14).<sup>(△)</sup>



Figure. 2. The Groom, pen, ink, and wash from Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Original Illustrated Sherlock Holmes* (Secaucus, NJ: Castle Books, 1979; 17).<sup>(△)</sup>

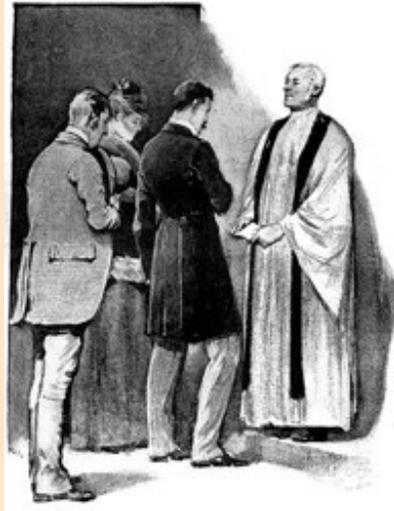


Figure. 3. Irene Adler's Wedding, pen, ink, and wash from Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Original Illustrated Sherlock Holmes* (Secaucus, NJ: Castle Books, 1979; 19).<sup>(A)</sup>



Figure. 4. The Youth, pen, ink, and wash from Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Original Illustrated Sherlock Holmes* (Secaucus, NJ: Castle Books, 1979; 23).<sup>(^)</sup>

#### Endnotes

(1)On the surface, the characters in “A Scandal in Bohemia” do not receive sexual gratification from their dissimulations. However, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out in *Epistemology of the Closet* , to “some people, the nimbus of ‘the sexual’ seems scarcely to extend beyond the boundaries of discrete genital acts; to others, it enfolds them loosely or floats virtually free of them” (25). Therefore, it is difficult to call dissimulation sexual or non-sexual when “the sexual” itself varies so much from person to person.<sup>(^)</sup>

(2)See Vic Muñoz and Ednie Kaeh Garrison, “Transpedagogies: A Roundtable Dialogue,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 36.4-5 (2008): 288-309; Madelyn Detloff, “Gender Please, Without the Gender Police: Rethinking Pain in Archetypal Narratives of Butch, Transgender, and FTM Masculinity,” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 10, no. 1 (March 2006): 87-105; Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore, *Nobody Passes: Rejecting the Rules of Gender and Conformity* (Seal Press, 2006); and Arlene Istar Lev, *Transgender Emergence:*

*Therapeutic Guidelines for Working with Gender-Variant People and their Families*  
(Routledge, 2004).<sup>(^)</sup>

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