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## **The Woman: Irene Adler in Literature, Media, and "A Scandal In Bohemia**

Adriana Victoria Romero

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*THE WOMAN: IRENE ADLER IN LITERATURE, MEDIA, AND “A SCANDAL IN  
BOHEMIA”*

A Thesis

by

ADRIANA VICTORIA ROMERO

Submitted to Texas A&M International University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

December 2019

Major Subject: English

*The Woman: Irene Adler In Literature, Media, And “A Scandal In Bohemia”*

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Approved as to style and content by:

Chair of Committee,	Paul J. Niemeyer
Committee Members,	Ursula Klein
	Manuel Broncano
	Angela Moran
Head of Department,	Jonathan Murphy

December 2019

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## ABSTRACT

*The Woman: Irene Adler In Literature, Media, And “A Scandal In Bohemia”* (December 2019)

Adriana Victoria Romero, B.A., Southwestern University;

Chair of Committee: Paul J. Niemeyer

“The Woman,” as Irene Adler has come to be known in the Sherlock Holmes universe, only appears in one story, yet this story has been adapted over the past years into numerous films, television shows, and even fan fiction. The purpose of this thesis is to prove that even though the portrayals of Adler mentioned in this thesis have taken place in the last thirty years, the original story, written in 1891, is a more progressive and feminist interpretation of Adler. From the television shows *Sherlock* and *Elementary* to the film *Sherlock Holmes*, each portrayal depicts several notable qualities Adler possesses, such as her independence, adaptability, and intelligence; but there is a common issue each portrayal has in trying to mesh these qualities with seduction and manipulation. It is possible that even though Adler is now gaining widespread attention in film and television, viewers are being misled by misconstrued interpretations of her and her claim to fame as the woman who outsmarted Holmes.

This thesis focuses on the original “Bohemia” story, as well as the three media portrayals of Adler in detail. The culture of Victorian Europe, specifically London is especially important in understanding the climate in which Adler was operating, because everything from the ways Victorian women dressed to the social class of women will offer a clearer perspective as to why Adler wanted the photograph of her and the King just as much as he did. Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* will also offer an explanation of the division of gender roles and Adler’s defiance of Victorian female expectations. Finally, the relationship between Adler and Holmes is the most important aspect of this

research. The original “Bohemia” does not denote that there is a romantic relationship between the two, yet all modern portrayals have implicit scenes that suggest otherwise. The separation of romance and business is what makes Adler a successful character, and it is how she ought to be portrayed in order to preserve the fact that even in 1891, strong feminist characters existed.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT .....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	vi
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	vii
CHAPTER	
I INTRODUCTION .....	1
Character Analysis and Film Adaptation .....	12
Holmes' Perspective on Adler .....	19
Shifting Identities and Roles in Victorian Time .....	22
Gender Roles in Victorian England .....	23
II A SCANDAL IN BOHEMIA .....	26
Feminist Representation in the Sherlock Holmes Universe .....	27
III IRENE ADLER THROUGH FILM AND TELEVISION .....	30
<i>Sherlock</i> - Lara Pulver .....	32
<i>Elementary</i> -Natalie Dormer .....	37
<i>Sherlock Holmes</i> -Rachel McAdams .....	40
IV CONCLUSION .....	43
WORKS CITED .....	47
VITA .....	51

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In this age of film and television, the demand to produce works based on literature, particularly book series' is ever growing. From *Outlander* to *The Lord of the Rings* to *Penny Dreadful*, the demand for period dramas on the big screen and small screen is even larger. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's work with detective Sherlock Holmes, the eponymous character of numerous Victorian novels and short stories is no exception to this demand. However the focus of this research will be directed uniquely towards a secondary, albeit significant character whose claim to fame is her rare and earned defeat of Holmes. Irene Adler, despite only appearing in one short story, stands out among all of Holmes' adversaries and intellectual equals because she serves as one of a few opponents and the only woman who outwits Holmes' sleuthing capabilities. As a result of her unorthodox views as to how a Victorian woman ought to act as well as her intellectual capabilities, Adler has become a mainstay in film and television adaptations of Sherlock Holmes stories. "The Woman," as Holmes refers to her, is known for her wit, intelligence, and capability to be one step ahead of Holmes at all times. While portrayals of Adler mean that recognition of positive female Victorian literary characters is booming, the manner in which she is portrayed has become increasingly problematic. It is possible, in fact, that the story, which was written in 1891 and takes place in 1888, is a more progressive feminist representation than its modern media counterparts. From the actresses who portray Adler to the hyper sexualized storylines she appears in, the film and television adaptations have stripped her of her gender defying independence and have transformed her into a "damsel in distress" or even a seductress. This research aims to prove that the original

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This thesis follows the model of *Modern Fiction Studies*.

story provides the only version of Adler that is not problematic in the sense that her character does not require saving, is not attracted to Holmes, and does not use her sexuality as a means of manipulation. What works with the original Adler is that she defies the behavior of the typical Victorian woman, but not enough to where she cannot still be admired for her class, intelligence, and finesse as a sleuth.

My main focus will consist of comparing the literary, television, and film portrayals of Irene Adler and analyzing the character fidelity in their approach to Adler's personality, appearance, and status as a friend or foe of Holmes. I will list Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's "A Scandal in Bohemia" (1891), specifically, the character of Irene Adler, as the primary research tool. Adler is one of fewer than ten significant female characters in the Sherlock Holmes series, and the only woman to outwit the character. Though the series relies heavily on Holmes' embodiment of Victorian masculinity to solve mysteries, "Scandal" is the exception. Adler uses disguises, acting, and intellect to secure a photograph of herself and the King of Bohemia together in a telling way, rather than allowing Holmes to retrieve the photograph to give to the King. The primary expectation of this research is to assert that despite the recognition Adler has received from the portrayals in film and television, the ultimate, most progressive representation is the original story.

Sherlock Holmes is reputed to be the ultimate literary detective of his generation. Several scholars have argued that the only reason Adler outsmarts Holmes is because of his infatuation with her. However, Doyle's text stresses, through the narration of John Watson, that it was not that he felt any emotion akin to love for Irene Adler and, "as a lover, he would have placed himself in a false position" (Doyle, "Scandal" 363), which implies that Holmes was not blinded by love or infatuation; he was simply bested by the better sleuth.

Despite only appearing on one story, Irene Adler has been a prominent character in contemporary film and television adaptations of Conan Doyle's stories. In each portrayal, Adler is defiant towards the stereotypical roles associated with women, even in modern day adaptations. In films like "Sherlock Holmes" (Guy Ritchie 2009) and "Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows" (Ritchie 2011), Rachel McAdams' Adler rejects the feminine Victorian archetype of the time as she takes on the role of a clever thief. Adler's reputation as a quasi-villainous character is revisited once more in BBC's *Sherlock* (2010) with Lara Pulver playing an altered version of Adler, a dominatrix who falls in love with Holmes. CBS' *Elementary* (2012) introduces a composite character of Adler and Professor Jamie Moriarty, played by Natalie Dormer. This adaptation introduces Adler/Moriarty as another love interest for Holmes; she is one of the antagonists of the series. Another aspect of the film and television portrayals that should be examined is the degree to which Adler is seen as a villain. The relationship between Adler and Holmes ranges from villains to partners to romantic interests through a variety of adaptations, even though Doyle's version explicitly states that the connection between the two is admiration. Ritchie, Adler eventually shifts from adversary to partner for Holmes, and they work together towards a common goal. In *Elementary*, the amalgam of Adler/Moriarty is Holmes' primary enemy for a large part of the series and a serial killer who seduces Holmes.

Adler is a woman of beauty, intelligence, and personal strength. She stands out as a progressive female character in a predominantly male series. After her time as the former lover to the King of Bohemia, she is somewhat of a courtesan, but she is still regarded as a refined and worldly woman. No matter the adaptation, Adler's claim to fame remains the same: she will forever be the woman who outsmarted Sherlock Holmes, even though her

reputation may not always be as respectable in the screen adaptations as opposed to the original story.

My main goal is comparing and contrasting the literary, film, and television adaptations of Irene Adler. I would like to look into the character description Doyle provides for Adler in order to prove that there is a lack of character fidelity on screen and the most progressive portrayal of Adler is in the original story. Fortunately, there are a handful of scholars who have approached “A Scandal in Bohemia” through a feminist lens and have explained the social expectations of women during the late nineteenth century. Another goal I have is to address Adler’s action of “cross-dressing” in order to escape Holmes and the King. As shocking as the concept of cross dressing may have been to Victorian women, cross-dressing allows Adler to move between the social classes of London, the theater, and every other location that aids in her defeat of Holmes.

Since the character of Irene Adler only appears in one story, there is a limit as to actual texts on the character that come directly from Doyle. Taking this into consideration, one example of a text that explains societal expectations for Victorian women is Simone de Beauvoir’s concept of the “eternal feminine” in *The Second Sex* (1953). De Beauvoir states, “If the definition provided for this concept is contradicted by the behavior of flesh-and-blood-women, it is the latter who are wrong; we are told not that Femininity is a false entity, but that the women concerned are not feminine” (4). Irene Adler is a working, independent, and intelligent woman in “Bohemia;” de Beauvoir writes that the women who did not pass as “passive, elegant, and silent” were considered unattractive and unfeminine. However, despite Adler’s unorthodox qualities, she was still “the woman” to Sherlock Holmes and even goes on to marry Mr. Gordon Norton. These virtues that women are enchained to are what de

Beauvoir refers as mythologies. The problem with these mythologies is that they imprison women as a whole. Unfortunately, women like Adler can be charged with “putting their humanity before their femininity,” and therefore not being a flesh-and-blood woman (6). Irene Adler is a prime example of operating in a time where women are not encouraged to be active in the workplace, or in their daily lives. Everything from Adler’s wardrobe to her surroundings prevents her from performing as an equal to her counterpart Holmes. The repercussions that come with the term “woman” are much greater than simply a label. Because she is woman, Adler must conform to the expectations of women in Victorian London and, in her case, this can restrain her.

Another aspect of *Second Sex* that applies to Adler is Beauvoir’s question, “What is a woman?” Sherlock Holmes refers to Adler as “the woman” when he reminisces about her, but he does this only to emphasize that she was the woman who outsmarted him. Because he uses the term “the woman” and not “a woman”, Holmes does not subject Adler to a submissive or inferior role in “Bohemia.” What works for “Bohemia” is the equality the text provides for Adler; she is not reduced to a lesser role; instead she is on a level playing field with Holmes. Beauvoir suggests that women have constantly struggled to find a balance of equality, but in the exceptional case of “Bohemia” Adler does not have the disadvantage of trying to catch up to Holmes; in fact, it is the other way around.

The portrayals of Adler over the years have remained somewhat similar in terms of characterization; however, there are a handful of portrayals that stand out among the rest. While the separation of Adler from “A Scandal in Bohemia” allows readers to explore her in new storylines and relationships, I can’t help but think that it takes away from the way Doyle intended for Adler to be portrayed. In the story, neither Adler nor Holmes finds the other

romantically attractive, therefore allowing their rivalry to be fueled purely through desire to be the best sleuth. Guy Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes* (2009) is a prime example of attempting to pair the two for all the wrong reasons. The scene in which they meet depicts Adler as a seductive femme fatale: she is wearing dark makeup, a red dress, and speaks to Holmes in a quiet, suggestive tone. They meet in Holmes' bedroom, alone, and it becomes clear that they have met before, with Adler telling Holmes to meet her at The Grand Hotel, in "their old room." Lastly, Holmes has a daguerreotype of Adler that he tries to hide from her, but she discovers it. Interactions like these between Adler and Holmes are exclusive to the film and television portrayals, and it is these interactions that confuse those who have not read the Sherlock Holmes stories into believing that their rivalry is fueled by romance. Arguably, any romantic feelings reduce the rivalry to the equivalent of a lover's quarrel. By separating romance from Adler and Holmes, Doyle puts Adler at the same intellectual level as Holmes, therefore making her an equal and worthy competitor, just like he does with Moriarty. He does not allow her femininity or beauty to interfere with her ability to be better than Holmes, therefore, Doyle makes pro-feminist decisions within the story that allow Adler to stand out among the other Victorian women of the time.

One of the main areas I will focus on is the set of themes, which Adler relates to: gender roles, independence, class, and intelligence. Adler's gender performance within "Bohemia" is crucial. By cross-dressing in men's clothes to escape Holmes, she not only separates herself from the expectations of women, she also freely and publicly acts like a man in order to get what she wants. However, it is through the cross dressing that Adler is able to shine; she meanders through her journey able to physically and mentally act as no woman could, or should.

One argument in favor of new adaptations of Adler could be that she is receiving a new wave of recognition for her abilities and intelligence that she may have not received before due to her appearing only in one story. In these modern adaptations, she is not restricted by Victorian female expectations, so she has the mobility to fight and participate in more action-oriented situations. Adler has rightfully earned her place as a notable character in the Sherlock Holmes universe thanks to her appearance, performance, and characterization in “Bohemia,” but in modern adaptations, Adler does not always find herself on the righteous path she was originally on. The use of her sexuality and romantic tension with Holmes have been used greatly in modern adaptations and rather than being recognized for her knowledge and physical abilities, she is now a femme fatale with a villainous agenda.

Looking specifically at the 2009 film and the episode of *Sherlock*, “A Scandal in Belgravia,” one of the first things Adler does is take off all of her clothes in front of Holmes, hoping to catch him off guard. By making Adler use her femininity and sexuality to defeat Holmes instead of her intellectual ability actually places her in an anti-feminist place of representation. One of Adler’s most admirable qualities in the story is that she is a fair player; even the King knows that Adler will do the honorable thing and keep the photograph in a safe place. By having the King admit that Adler is an honest person, it further suggests that Doyle possibly never intended to make Adler a villain, which many modern adaptations have leaned towards. Also, the film portrayal completely omits the reason behind Adler’s marriage (Doyle mentions that she loves her husband and did not enter into a loveless union). In the film, Adler is portrayed as a gold digger whose trade is attracting and marrying wealthy men.

The recognition Adler has begun to receive in modern portrayals is a step in the right direction; however, by creating romantic tension between Adler and Holmes, filmmakers and TV writers negate everything she has worked for. Her motivations to outwit Holmes are not based on love or deceit, but the knowledge of her heroic capabilities. She may have more freedom in these adaptations, but that means nothing if the writers push for a relationship between her and Holmes, and if she continues to use her wiles instead of her capabilities. These adaptations do have moments where Adler's character has progressed since her introduction in 1891, but her sometimes villainous and deceitful ways completely separate her from the honorable woman and feminist she has become, turning her into a morally bankrupt manipulator without any worthy qualities.

Doyle explains that shortly before the events in "Bohemia" Irene Adler had become Irene Norton, which contradicts the idea that she is an independent woman. Although Adler conforms to a major social expectation of Victorian women, I believe she does this in order to assert even more independence. By marrying (for love), she rejects any accusations of putting her humanity before her femininity (as Beauvoir states), therefore allowing her to not blend in with other women. Adler's marriage gives her the ability to be covert and invisible from time to time, all the while maintaining an appropriate social standing.

Among Adler's many admirable qualities, it is her intelligence that is perhaps the most enviable. Her knowledge of the theater and the ability to manipulate gender roles, among other things, gives her the upper hand against Holmes and the King. Adler was always one step ahead of Holmes and everyone else; she knew she had to get married in order to operate as quietly as she does, she knew she had to keep the photograph to herself in order to escape the possibility of blackmail, and she knew the only way to move past Holmes

was to take a page from his book and use a disguise. Throughout “Bohemia,” Adler wears many masks: she is a wife, former lover, a man, a thief, and an intellectual equal to Holmes. She uses her abilities cautiously and throughout the entire story never makes a single error.

Social class and hierarchy in London are another important theme in the story. Adler does not approach this with the upper hand; she is a Yankee from New Jersey who works as an opera singer and was potentially a courtesan of the King of Bohemia. Adler quickly realizes that she must rectify her reputation in order to survive. Fortunately (or conveniently), she marries Mr. Norton for love and is able to exclusively be his wife and leave her past behind. While the newly minted Mrs. Norton becomes a respected married woman, she can also use her multiple identities to her advantage when she needs them. In “Bohemia,” Adler shifts through the social classes of London, which ultimately allows her to defeat Holmes. A woman without Adler’s background would not have the capability to outwit Holmes, because they never had to work to survive since women in the workforce were still rare and they would have likely married men and been supported by them. Adler quickly learns that her time as an independent woman/singer/potential courtesan can be an advantage, and not something of which to be ashamed.

The various portrayals of Adler suggest that other writers and creators are trying to correct what Doyle “got wrong.” By placing her in different occupations and further complicating her relationship with Holmes, these other writers are subverting what Doyle himself created: a platonic relationship between a man and woman who admire each other’s crafts and nothing more. As I have stated, the film and television portrayals of Irene Adler vary in representation, but there are traits that remain constant. From an art thief to serial killer to dominatrix to a former lover, the adaptations of Adler always show a woman who is

independent, intelligent, and cunning. She is a woman of class and grace and is usually placed in an occupation related to the arts (for example, an actress in the books and an art restorer in *Elementary*). In order to fully grasp the constant traits of Adler's character, I will need to compare and contrast each adaptation of Adler on screen. I will also need to study the setting in which the particular Irene Adler will be placed and her relationship to Sherlock Holmes. It is also important to determine whether the stories have any connections to "A Scandal in Bohemia" and if the particular Adler is perceived as a hero or villain. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle may have only included Irene Adler in one story, but her reputation precedes itself. As the woman who outsmarted Holmes, she serves as a feminist symbol within a literary series that predominantly praises masculine behavior.

The major goal within my research is to focus on the character of Irene Adler, not entirely through the perspective of Sherlock Holmes or Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, but through the lens of feminism. I want to understand how and why she is a symbol of the progressive woman. Though every portrayal of Adler varies, there are at least three characteristics that are constant: she is independent, intelligent, and she has at one point or another bested Sherlock Holmes. The primary theorists for my research will be Simone de Beauvoir and Brian McFarlane.

Another major research goal is to fully understand Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's perception of Irene Adler and feminism and how it applies to Adler's overall character. Ironically, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, a collection of short stories, begins with "A Scandal in Bohemia," therefore Irene Adler is one of the first characters readers are first introduced to by Watson. Whether this was intentional by Conan Doyle is unknown; however, it is interesting to see that the first story of the series depicts Holmes losing to

Adler: a woman. It does seem that at times Doyle subjects Adler to suggestive descriptions of women, for example, “she’s the prettiest thing under a bonnet on this planet” (Doyle, Scandal 230). This can classify “Bohemia” as an anti-feminist tale because this text suggests that the only reason Adler has found success at the opera, with Mr. Norton, and the King, is because of her looks.

Irene Adler may not be an amalgam of all the expectations that women were faced with in the 1800s, but that does not mean that she is any less of a woman. She disguises herself in men’s clothing in order to not be restricted by women’s clothing and behavior, and therefore acts quickly and freely to regain possession of the photograph. The photograph of Adler and the King may have repercussions for both of them, but she spends the entirety of “Bohemia” trying to retrieve the photograph to protect herself and no one else. Adler knew that if the photograph were to end up in the hands of anyone other than herself, she would be susceptible to blackmail or coercion. She takes power of the situation, which ultimately gives Adler her freedom.

One goal I wish to accomplish is debunking the theory that Sherlock Holmes’ regard for Adler is something romantic. The television and film portrayals suggest that at one point or another, Adler and Holmes were romantically involved. Whether it is Rachel McAdams and Robert Downey Jr. in the film series, Johnny Lee Miller and Natalie Dormer in *Elementary*, or Benedict Cumberbatch and Lara Pulver in *Sherlock*, the duo is always trying to hide their chemistry or deny their previous/upcoming liaison. Contrary to this, Doyle explicitly states (through the narration of Watson) that Holmes’ feelings for Adler are nothing more than awe and admiration.

Essentially, my objective is to prove that Irene Adler is successful in her mission because she is better than Sherlock Holmes. Adler does not outwit Holmes because of her beauty or femininity; she deduces the best ways to retrieve the photograph and uses her skills, swiftness, and intelligence to go about unnoticed. I would also like to examine Watson's quote in the story, "the best laid plans of Sherlock Holmes were beaten by a woman's wit" (Doyle, "Scandal" 298). While it acknowledges the success of Adler's endeavors, it can't help but have a condescending connotation towards the ability of women. Once again, the perception and expectations of Victorian women were much different than they are now. A significant aspect of my research will seek to uncover Doyle's characterization and opinion of Adler, and how her personality was perceived in the nineteenth century and compare and contrast how it would be perceived today.

#### CHARACTER ANALYSIS AND FILM ADAPTATION

My analysis for Arthur Conan Doyle's character Irene Adler only lies within the original twenty pages of "Bohemia" so there is only so much one can derive about who she really is. She is a compelling character with unique traits that filmmakers use in adaptations of her story. Doyle's narrative describes Adler as a character that disregards societal norms and utilizes her femininity in a time when being a woman meant being inferior to men. She represents independence and intelligence in a way that does not make her a femme fatale, rather a successful being. Michael Hatch and Rebecca Jones write in "Adapting Irene Adler: The Scandals of 'The (New) Woman' in Contemporary Television and Film" that Adler's various adaptations are a nod to her most important characteristics. Even though Adler is placed in different storylines, she is always recognizable. She is a woman with status, education, and the ability to go unrecognized when she needs to be. Hatch and Jones attribute

Adler's constant individuality to a set of cardinal functions that every filmmaker and writer adheres by: "her character, narrative, and interactions with Holmes" (4). Whether the storyline is a successful portrayal of Adler's independence and feminist persona, each successful adaptation gives her the unique personality, dialogue, and back and forth with Holmes that was so prominent in the original story.

Hatch and Jones draw from film theorist Brian McFarlane's *Novel to Film* to suggest that the original narrative of the character (novel) acts only as a reference for future adaptations (film) and not as a word for word retelling. Hatch and Jones state "a film does not adapt the novel so much as it identifies the primary narrative arc and retells the story on film" (6). With "Bohemia" Doyle establishes that Adler's defining characteristic is her defeat of Holmes and the King, naming her as the only woman to outsmart Holmes throughout the entire series. Hatch and Jones believe that by taking away her victory, "her cunning and daring would be rendered less than that of Holmes and she would be a mere antagonist who happened to be female, as opposed to 'the woman'" (7). Though adaptation is the interpretation of one writer's interpretation of another writer's work, the adaptations of Adler pose a problem because they fail to translate the key themes of "Bohemia" and focus only on the possibility of a romantic relationship with Holmes.

The key themes of Adler's journey are her multi-layered character, her secrecy, and her resourcefulness. The significance of these themes lies in the fact that both Holmes and the readers only know about Adler what she chooses to let them know. There is no transparency in her character, which allows her to retain a veil of mystery. The film and television adaptations may use mystery to introduce the character of Adler, but they also draw on her vulnerability and weaknesses. McFarlane's theory can be applied to specific

situations where the original text may be outdated and a fresh take on a novel for a film may prove to be more successful, but this is not the case for Irene Adler. The three film and television adaptations mentioned in this work not only sexualize Adler, but they also strip her of her defining characteristic. Adler's defeat of Holmes is overshadowed or even omitted, leaving Adler to be a damsel in distress waiting for Holmes to save her.

In terms of Adler's storyline, Hatch and Jones focus on several key moments in "Bohemia" that summarizes her character. Adler is first presented as seductive, mysterious, and dangerous to Holmes and Watson. She is also revealed to be an American woman who has worked at an opera house. Adler also immediately comes off as threatening because she has the upper hand on the King who risks blackmail if he does not acquiesce. While she is not entirely conventional, she displays some typical characteristics of a Victorian woman: she marries Mr. Norton, a lawyer, and is known to have some education. She also lives in a respectable part of London and seems to be able to afford a household staff. By posing this juxtaposition of a woman who is smart enough to handle her self in real world situations but also maintain the reputation of a noble lady, Doyle creates a character that is multi-dimensional. She is also confident in her abilities, following Holmes and Watson in disguise and bidding them goodnight as they walk home. Possibly her most admirable quality is her fairness. Her actions may make it difficult to trust her, but she is compassionate towards the King's delicate situation, and chooses not to expose the photograph for both their sakes. There is an equal balance of power, compassion, wit, and fairness in the story that does not translate onto the screen because of several factors, including casting choices and staying away from the original story. Film and television adaptations of Adler portray her as selfish and concerned only with taking care of herself. She is even unable to maintain a relationship

in any screen adaptations, while she is married in the story. The cardinal functions that make Adler a successful character are these semi-noble virtues she possesses.

Hatch and Jones have categorized other characteristics that are unique to Adler into seven sections: “seduction, betrayal, marriage, taunt, victory, memento, and satisfaction” (9). Her most significant characteristic, however, is that she defies identification; “from dangerous seductress to benign wife to disguised woman, to one seeking protection rather than mischief or gain,” she functions as a sort of character chameleon that allows her to successfully maneuver between different personalities. Because of Adler’s success here, her personality is established: she is a careful, cautious, astute woman who “flaunts social conventions for her own purposes, but not reckless or careless” (10). There is also a sense of ambiguity with her character because from Holmes’ perspective, she displays a villainous streak by withholding the photograph and going through extreme lengths to prevent Holmes from retrieving it, but she is actually only protecting her own self and reputation. The ambiguity of Adler’s intentions is crucial for her storyline because it represents the mystery that originally captivated readers; with the film and television adaptations, it becomes evidently clear that Adler’s intentions lie with the villainous and selfish character traits. Rather than using her skills and intelligence to outwit Holmes, the screen adaptations rely on Adler’s femininity and sexuality to get ahead, making her a femme fatale, which is not who she was in the original “Bohemia.”

Krumm’s “‘A Scandal in Bohemia’ and Sherlock Holmes’ Ultimate Mystery Solved” suggest that there are only two categories that women can be placed in during the Victorian era: the housewife or the harlot. Adler’s disregard of “political and social boundaries” implies that “she obviously belongs in the second category” (Krumm 194). While present day

readers might not consider Adler's actions scandalous, her disregard for boundaries in 1891 surely came off as shocking to readers then. Because the measure of scandal has varied in the last century, this suggests that screen adaptations must progress with the time and create scandal on a bigger scale to keep the same shock value (i.e., Adler appearing naked when she first meets Holmes in *Sherlock*). Krumm also suggests that seduction and betrayal are the key motifs that filmmakers use when adapting Adler, but they may not always be essential to the character. The only time Adler relied on seduction in "Bohemia" was during her relationship with the King; however screen adaptations have her acting on her ability to seduce Holmes and later feel the betrayal when he ultimately defeats her. The use of these two motifs in screen adaptations of Adler is completely arbitrary because they were not used in the same manner in the original story. Krumm uses the example of Guy Ritchie's film to indicate the differences between Adler on screen and Adler in the story. He mentions that Ritchie has Adler introduce herself in the film rather than having Holmes and Watson do so, suggesting she has more agency in the film, but this is overshadowed by her (implied) previous sexual relationship with Holmes. The original "Bohemia" shows that Adler has a specific set of motivations not based off of seduction or betrayal, but on self-preservation. The betrayal motif is most prominent in the story when Adler tricks Holmes while dressed as a man. According to Krumm, the betrayal is usually flipped in the screen adaptations because it is Holmes who ultimately defeats (or saves) Adler.

The scene in which Adler outsmarts Holmes is the most important in the entire story, not because of the fact that she does it in men's clothing, but because of what she says in her letter to Holmes afterwards. Ever the Bohemian, Adler writes, "Male costume is nothing new to me. I often take advantage of the freedom, which it gives. I sent John, the coachman, to

watch you, ran upstairs, got into my walking clothes, as I call them, and came down as you departed” (Doyle, “Scandal” 383). Not only does she dress in male clothing to fool Holmes, she does it on a regular basis. In Victorian London, there is a woman of respectable status walking the streets in a suit, pants, and tie without any qualms. Whether others can tell that she is a woman when she is doing so, does not matter because her confidence overpowers any judgment she may receive. This agency that Adler takes a hold of is yet another gender defying act in her life to go about without any sort of recognition.

However, one could also argue that betrayal occurs when Adler betrays conventional female identity. Krumm argues that one of Adler’s key traits is that she “weaponizes her sexuality” to “contend with men and establish herself as financially and economically independent” (200). By doing so, Adler asserts power that women do not generally have access to in Victorian times and in the story, she obtains another key trait: victory. The essence of Adler’s character is her victory; she singlehandedly defeats the world’s best detective and retires to America with her husband without seeking out Holmes in the future. Victory is not present in the screen adaptations of Adler; in all adaptations she is rescued by Holmes, killed, or arrested. This completely negates her clever, resourceful, and conscious nature that outwits Holmes. Whether a screen adaptation uses Adler’s sexuality, femininity, or resourcefulness or not is one thing, but the most important thing to remember about Adler is that she has remained the only woman to defeat Holmes for over one hundred years. Her victory is her most defining quality, yet screen adaptations do not focus on that and instead choose to highlight the chemistry between her and Holmes. Without her victory, Adler is just another character in the Sherlock Holmes universe that is either saved or defeated by the eponymous detective.

McFarlane continues in *Novel* by saying, “Novel and film can share the same story, the same 'raw materials', but are distinguished by means of different plot strategies which alter sequence, highlight different emphases, which--in a word--defamiliarize the story” (56). Modern adaptations can be successful because they can create situations for characters that are not confined to a specific time or place. However, it is crucial to keep some fidelity of the original character and story because filmmakers risk creating a completely different character. McFarlane once again refers to the importance of the cardinal functions of the character and emphasizes that adaptations are collaborations of old and new ideas that work only if there is an equal balance of both. A successful adaptation clearly portrays the original text while also embellishing it with new ideas. Without this, the filmmaker risks telling two different stories and negating the fidelity to the original character.

In defense of film and television adaptations of Irene Adler, McFarlane stresses novels linearity and film’s spatiality. He believes that there is only so much a reader can imagine from words on a paper, and film allows for a visual experience to take place and see a character from different perspectives. He uses the example of *Great Expectations*’ Miss Havisham: Dickens, for instance, may force us to 'see' Miss Havisham in the interior of Satis House in the order he has chosen in *Great Expectations*; as we watch her visual representation in David Lean's film we may be struck first, not by the yellow-whiteness of her apparel, but by the sense of her physical presence's being dwarfed by the decaying grandeur of the room (58).

While readers might only get a “linear” experience of Adler in “Bohemia” screen adaptations allow viewers to see her every move, from her facial expressions, quirks, and skills. McFarlane believes that a stronger connection to a character happens through screen

because viewers can see the character's emotions and create a stronger bond than when they read about a character's emotions and actions. He also states that when someone sees a film, they are seeing "a filmmaker's basic assumption" of what they believe to be a modern, but loyal interpretation of the original text. While this may work for some novel and film pairings, it is not the case for Adler. Screen adaptations do draw on her intelligence and sleuthing abilities, but they fail to highlight her most memorable quality: her victory. In most adaptations, Adler is shown to have a personal relationship with Holmes, either romantic or as adversaries, but that was not the case in the original "Bohemia." Adler's only connection to Holmes is through the King, who reaches out to him. With the exception of one meeting and a letter, Adler and Holmes do not engage in any sort of relationship, yet these screen adaptations focus solely on the possibility of one, which completely overlooks Adler's capabilities and skills. While it is okay to deviate from the original text in order to produce a successful adaptation, there are limits, because the only part of Adler that is left on screen is that she is a woman who at one point or another has interacted with Sherlock Holmes.

#### HOLMES' PERSPECTIVE ON ADLER

"In his eyes she eclipses and predominates the whole of her sex" (Doyle, "Scandal" 363). The genesis of "Bohemia" is the platonic admiration Holmes feels for Adler throughout their encounter. He considers her to be intellectually superior to most men and even contradicts the King of Bohemia in one of their conversations, "Would she not have made an admirable queen? Is it not a pity she was not on my level? "From what I have seen of the lady, she seems indeed, to be on a very different level to your Majesty" (383). However this reply does not imply that there are romantic undertones to Holmes' admiration. In fact, Christopher Redmond, the author of the *Sherlock Holmes Handbook*, argues, "the Canon

provides little basis for either sentimental or prurient speculation about a Holmes-Adler relationship” (53). Redmond furthers his argument by stating that the possibility of a romance between the two would take away from Adler’s reputation, because Holmes’ fascination would not be genuine, but rather be influenced by lust.

The progressive and feminist character of Irene Adler has even developed a cult following throughout the century, from fan fiction to a series of books being published following her sleuthing journeys. Carole Nelson Douglas has authored eight books with Adler as the main character, a brilliant detective caught in several dilemmas, from searching for Marie Antoinette’s diamonds to trying to find the killer of a sailor found in the Seine river. The series continues after the events of “Bohemia” and follows Adler and her husband Godfrey Norton as they navigate their way through mysteries all over Europe. Though she has only one story to work with, she focuses on the dynamics and complexities of her character. The style of the books is similar to Doyle’s, with Penelope Huxleigh acting as Adler’s Watson and narrating their adventures, but juxtapositions the timid country girl Huxleigh with the Bohemian and confidant Adler. The first book begins with the reemergence of Adler and her husband in Paris after they were declared dead because their names were found on a list of passengers aboard a train that was destroyed, leaving no survivors. Adler then becomes aware of a “Watson” who is in need of help and wonders if this is the same Watson she outwitted with Sherlock Holmes some time back. This draws her back into the detective lifestyle that encourages her to utilize the skillset and intelligence that readers were only offered a glimpse of in the original story.

If one were to look at the canon of Adler in the Sherlock Holmes’ stories, it is implied that Adler’s detective work only lasts during the time of “Bohemia.” Nelson takes Adler’s

abilities and essentially re-tells the Holmes stories, but through the perspective of a woman. Another important aspect of the Nelson novels is the character fidelity Nelson adheres to with Adler. Throughout the eight novels, Nelson never relies on Adler's sexuality or appearance to move ahead in the case, instead focusing on the intellectual capabilities of Huxleigh and Adler. In a necessary cameo, Sherlock Holmes even says, "How unfair it is that enterprise is called a harlot when it wears a female face" (Nelson 10). The primary focus for Adler and the readers is completing the task at hand, but also working towards bridging the gap between feminism and independence. At one point, in a nod to the original story, Adler even says, "Winning is nothing unless the opponent is worthy" (3). Nelson's work, along with around seven other "fan fiction" stories of Adler depends on the intertwining of mystery and intrigue with little to no mention of romance.

Another interesting point to note is that each of the television episodes and the films were directed/written by men. Guy Ritchie directed the two films; while Stephen Moffat wrote the *Sherlock* episodes and Robert Doherty created the series *Elementary*. There is something to be said when a character who is originally married off in the story is posited in one way or another as Sherlock Holmes' romantic counterpart.

The stories of Sherlock Holmes work because they separate his personal feelings from his professional life and very little of Holmes' private life is known through the entire series of books. Holmes essentially functions better as an asexual character because his dedication lies in solving the mysteries he is faced with. In the original "Bohemia" Adler does marry Mr. Norton, but it does not interfere with her mission in keeping the photograph safe. Instead, Mr. Norton is only ever mentioned twice throughout the story, which is unique

considering how important marriage was in a woman's life in Victorian times. Mr. Norton is a secondary character with little influence over his wife.

### SHIFTING IDENTITIES AND ROLES IN VICTORIAN TIME

In order to fully grasp the importance of Adler's role in "Scandal" gender roles in 19<sup>th</sup> century England must be understood. Traditionally, women in the workforce were not a typically common practice. When the demand for work increased, women began to take on laborious jobs that were historically for men, such as heavy machinery operators, secretaries, etc. The turn of the 19th century presented both an opportunity for change and a chance to reexamine gender roles. Arthur J. Munby and Hannah Cullwick's book *Working Women in Victorian Britain* presents the argument that times were changing during the 1800's and perhaps that was due to effective and powerful female leadership from women like Queen Victoria. Her reign plays a significant role in the *Sherlock Holmes* series and arguably Doyle positions the Queen as a strong leader as a commentary on the shifting times, while he portrays the "King of Bohemia" as a foolish and reckless man trying to escape scandal.

Women like Adler sought employment in places like the opera and the theater and took on tedious labor. Anthony Burgess, author of *English Literature*, believes that the growing change of England meant that people needed to adapt to a different mindset as well. He writes: In many ways, it was an age of progress – railway building, steamships, and reforms of all kinds. But it was also an age of doubt. There was too much poverty, too much injustice, too much ugliness and too little certainty about faith or morals. Thus it became also an age of crusaders and reformers and theorists. The strict morality, the holiness of family life, owed a good deal to the example of Queen Victoria herself, and her indirect influence over literature as well as social life, was considerable (Burgess 74).

While these new ideas certainly were a change of pace for the Victorian women, what separates Adler from the common denominator of the bourgeoisie English woman is that she is a Yankee from America, so the values of hard work have already possibly been instilled in her. She did not come from nobility, and was not born into a role of privilege. From Doyle's description of Adler, she was neither rich nor poor, so she was most likely a member of the middle/working class, which according to Munby, was a new class system where the product of hard work was wealth. He explains, "The middle class women represented emotions, the Heart, or sometimes Soul, seat of morality and tenderness. Women performed these functions as keepers of the Hearth in Home, and here we find a body/house connection, which figured, widely in the Victorian view" (Munby 79).

#### GENDER ROLES IN VICTORIAN ENGLAND

Kathryn Hughes writes in her article, "Gender Roles in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century," that prior to the beginning of the 1800s, gender roles were intertwined and the differences between the expectations of men and women were marginal (2). It was not until the Victorian era began that the division of duties began to increase; men began working in places other than family-owned businesses which meant that rather than splitting the workload with their wives and families, they left to work in factories and offices and left the women and children to take over the domestic responsibilities of the household. This soon led to the concept of men and women beginning to only come together in the mornings for breakfast and in the evenings for dinner, leaving the rest of the day to work on their respective duties alone.

Hughes suggests that the beginning of the "separate spheres" was the beginning of the current "definition of the natural characteristics of women and men" (2). Women who were considered the weaker, yet morally superior sex overwhelmingly controlled the domestic

sphere. Hughes continues by arguing that the responsibilities of the domestic sphere were far more important than those of the public sphere. Women were in charge of “counterbalancing the moral taint of the public sphere in which their husbands labored all day” they maintained the reputation of the household, and they were charged with perhaps the most important responsibility of all: the upbringing of the next generation (4).

Though the expectations of Victorian women were marginally less important than those of men in the public sphere, Hughes suggests that around the 1840s, women’s reputations began to drastically change. Gone were the days were women could impress potential suitors with their domestic abilities; now, they were focusing on the education, artistic abilities, and mannerisms. Hughes draws parallels to Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* and the character Caroline Bingley, who reveals the new ways in which a woman can attract a noble suitor: “A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions” (8). This suggests that men had begun to show interest in women’s independence and their intellectual pursuits, which began to do away with the ultra-feminine qualities of women, like piety and submission that made them the inferior gender.

While these expectations specifically apply to women in Europe, Irene Adler is no exception to the standards of Victorian women. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, women in America were known for being active in the workforce, participating in the suffrage movement, and seeking higher education. The absence of nobility in America acted as a catalyst for women of all classes to take advantages of the opportunities American provided them. Coming from America, Adler was less refined than the Victorian woman; she

was independent, outspoken, and educated. She was also a workingwoman and spent time in the theater, learning the arts of disguise, acting, and song.

## CHAPTER II

### A SCANDAL IN BOHEMIA

The original short story, written in 1891, involves several new and returning characters, including John Watson, Godfrey Norton, and the King of Bohemia. The story begins with Sherlock Holmes talking to his long time partner John Watson in London on the 20<sup>th</sup> of March 1888 (Doyle 364). A man wearing a mask, who is soon revealed to be Wilhelm Gottsreich Sigismund von Ormstein, the king of Bohemia, approaches them. He informs Holmes and Watson that he is in need of their assistance in retrieving a set of photographs in which he appears. The photographs are of a delicate and scandalous nature, which would put the King's engagement to a Scandinavian princess at risk of ending. The King reveals that the photographs are in the possession of Irene Adler, an opera singer from America and the other person in the photographs. The King is desperate as he has sent countless men to Adler's residence to retrieve the photographs, but they have all been unsuccessful. Holmes and Watson agree to help him.

Using the art of disguise, Holmes manages to obtain useful information from Adler's residence and her employees while dressed as a groom. He learns that each day, a man named Godfrey Norton visits her home without fail. On this particular day, Holmes witnesses Norton and Adler leaving her home together and going to the Church of St. Monica. Interestingly, Holmes finds himself attending Adler and Norton's wedding and sees them immediately after going their separate ways. Dressed as a member of the clergy, Holmes returns to Adler's residence, and in an effort to distract Adler, stages a fight on the street with several other men.

Upon entering Adler's home to recover, Watson waits for Holmes' signal to throw a smoke rocket thru her window and yells "Fire" (Doyle, Scandal 379). Frantically, Alder immediately goes to a wall panel in the room where Holmes deduces the photographs are stored. Afterwards, as Holmes and Watson are walking to 221B Baker Street, they continue to come up with ways to get the photographs back. As they converse, "a slim youth in an ulster" says, "Goodnight, Mister Sherlock Holmes" (381). While he cannot place the voice, Holmes knows that it is someone he has met before.

Holmes and Watson's plan to arrive at Adler's home the next morning comes to a halt when they realize that she is gone, and all that is left is a letter for Holmes. Adler writes to Holmes, saying she admires his ability to manipulate his way into her home, despite her knowledge that he was the clergyman. She also writes that the young man who bid Holmes goodnight the night before was her, in disguise. Adler finishes her letter by reassuring Holmes that she and her husband love each other and have left England permanently, so the King should not worry about the photographs going public, as she does not plan to expose him or ruin his wedding.

As the King thanks Holmes and Watson for their hard work, he offers Holmes a payment, in the form of an "emerald snake ring" (Doyle, Scandal 377). Holmes declines, saying he only wants the photograph Adler left of her in the letter to forever remind him of "The Woman" who outwitted him and used his own tactics to outsmart him.

#### FEMINIST REPRESENTATION IN THE SHERLOCK HOLMES UNIVERSE

Though it may seem unimportant to readers that Irene Adler is an American opera singer, her race, gender, and social class are specific choices that Doyle made for her character. Hadar Aviram, author of "Dainty Hands: Perceptions of Women and Crime in

Sherlock Holmes Stories” studies the statistical evidence of progressive behavior towards women in Doyle’s work. The number of significant female characters throughout the entire series is less than ten, with the other women acting only in minor roles, and he attributes this to the attitudes and expectations toward Victorian women.

The Sherlock Holmes stories, which were at the height of their popularity between 1891 and 1927, “represented a full spectrum of the Victorian social universe” (Aviram 242). Doyle had a tendency to create female characters that were very seldom as educated or skilled as Holmes. Aviram also mentions that Doyle did not have a preference as to the social classes that his female characters came from; the spectrum of these characters ranged from working women to nobility to street women. Aviram’s research concludes that thirty women appear in the Sherlock Holmes as a “victim” while only fifteen appear in a neutral role. Also important to note are the social classes of women in the stories: twenty-nine are classified under the “lower to middle class” while twenty-seven are women of “nobility, royalty, new money, Bohemian, artist, or society” (242). Finally, the ethnicities of these women are also interesting because of the sixty female characters (major and minor) that appear in the stories, forty-three are British, while eight are from the Americas, six are European, and three are Latin American (243). This suggests that although the ratio of independent female characters to “damsels in distress” is disproportionate, Doyle was consciously aware of including characters from all walks of life.

Muses function only as the objects of desire in the Holmes universe. They can also be the driving factor in having a man commit a crime in order to win the affection. Muses can be the cause of the most destruction because of their title, status, and beauty, among other qualities. Aviram argues that muses should be held accountable for their indirect roles in the

crimes their suitors commit because they “serve as the inspiration and muse for men’s altercations” and in the case of Lady Brakenstall, a wealthy noblewoman, she refuses to reveal the name of the perpetrator after he causes a multitude of damages to win her hand.

The most unique and most evolved character type is the entrepreneur. She functions as a free agent who is among the most independent of the female character in the Holmes universe. Aviram asserts that the quintessential example of the independent entrepreneur is Irene Adler. Because she has the photographs in her possession, she takes agency of the situation between her and the King of Bohemia. Adler forces a gender switch by making a man ask Holmes for help, rather than a woman. Another important characteristic trait to note is the fact that Adler is technically a Bohemian artist from America, but Aviram argues that she “defies class, which frees her to engage with kings and solicitors, and move freely across the demographic divide” (252). Adler is the exception in the Holmes universe. By fooling Holmes and the King, Adler makes sure that “the King’s vacuous, pompous mannerisms are clearly inferior to Irene’s resourcefulness and courage” (252). Aviram concludes his journal by arguing that even though each female character in the stories will fall under one of the four character types, Adler is rare enough to where she may eventually need her own category. She is the most notable female character and one of the handfuls of opponents to outsmart Holmes. He also stresses that while the character types are accurate in their descriptions, they will eventually become an outdated method in trying to understand Victorian female characters. By removing the labels of “captive, muse, entrepreneur, and protector” female characters become less sensationalized and gendered, and in turn become liberated from traditional gender roles.

### CHAPTER III

#### IRENE ADLER THROUGH FILM AND TELEVISION

Perhaps what makes the intrigue of Irene Adler so captivating is the fact that she only appears in one of Doyle's stories. However, within the twenty or so pages of "Bohemia" she manages to stand out as a workingwoman, "cross-dresser" and sleuth. The creative liberties writers and producers have taken with her character in a variety of media have differed vastly. As of 2019, the IMDB recognizes twenty-three different film or television representations of Adler. Though every version shows Adler in a different capacity, there is a common denominator of traits that each portrayal of Adler possesses: she is Holmes' opponent, sharply intelligent, and she in one way or another tries to seduce Holmes (though that does not occur in the original story). For the purposes of this research, the adaptations that will be mentioned will be the three most recognized performances involving Adler: Rachel McAdams in the *Sherlock Holmes* films, Lara Pulver in *Sherlock*, and Natalie Dormer in *Elementary*.

At one point or another in almost all "Bohemia" adaptations, Adler and Holmes prompt sexual tension between each other and in some cases, even hint at having a romantic past. However, Doyle never makes a reference throughout "Bohemia" that suggests a romantic relationship between the two. Arguably, the relationship between Adler and Holmes is among the most significant throughout the series (alongside Watson and Moriarty), but it only works as a platonic partnership. The romantic aspect of Adler and Holmes dismisses their rivalry as simply vengeful former lovers determined to seek revenge, rather than two talented sleuths using their intelligence and capabilities to outsmart the other.

*Narrative Comprehensions* by Catherine Emmott explores the character attributes that make characters in film and television. With Irene Adler, Emmott believes that by separating her from the “Bohemia” plot, filmmakers can explore new ways to adapt her story into different scenarios with Holmes. However, Emmott states that the worst thing filmmakers could do is take a character and tarnish the qualities that make them stand out in the first place. In order to be a successful adaptation, “a similar chain of events must appear, resulting in Irene Adler remaining a rebellious, socially manipulative character who succeeds in deceiving and eluding Sherlock Holmes through a series of reversals” (Emmott 2). Emmott stresses that Adler’s character is one of the most captivating ones in the Sherlock Holmes universe because of her rejection of the social expectations of the time. Adler has the potential to be a primary character in adaptations, but the failure of filmmakers to utilize her womanhood and professionalism has doomed any portrayal to harsh criticism.

Rachel McAdams is an actress known for her mainstream works like *The Notebook* (2005), *The Time Traveler’s Wife* (2009), and comedies like *Mean Girls* (2004), but has also merged into action pieces like *Red Eye* (2005) and *True Detective* (2014). Natalie Dormer, best known as the beguiling Anne Boleyn in *The Tudors* series and the seductive and manipulative Margery Tyrell in *Game of Thrones*, is yet another actress who portrays Adler without any previous work in action or thriller pieces. The choice to cast seductive, beautiful women to play Adler is an attempt to pair her off with Holmes as the damsel in distress. This more completely goes against the original story and Doyle’s intention to not put them in a romantic relationship. Lara Pulver, *Sherlock’s* Adler, may not have been a well-known actress prior to her character arc on the show, but now she is classified as the woman who met Sherlock Holmes, while she was naked and pushed the asexual detective to fall for her.

While we may not be entirely familiar with the appearance of the original Adler, other than she is described as being older than her late twenties, and she was a “lovely woman, with a face a man might die for” (Doyle 380), the over-sexualized women that have portrayed her are likely chosen for their beauty and chemistry with the Holmes character (Doyle 380).

McAdams, Dormer, and Pulver are all beautiful actresses, but they are known more for their roles as romantic counterparts, not so much for their action roles, and their roles as Adler have one unique characteristic in common: seduction. They use their bodies, rather than their intelligence, to influence Holmes, with McAdams and Pulver both appearing naked in front of Holmes in order to throw him off his train of thought.

#### *SHERLOCK*- LARA PULVER

*Sherlock* first introduces Adler in the episode “A Scandal in Belgravia” the first episode of the second series. The actress who portrays her is Lara Pulver, whose appearance as Adler as a woman with dark, curly hair, a fit physique, and is likely in her mid to late thirties. Known only as “The Woman” she is a dominatrix who immediately lets the audience know through her mannerisms and thoughts that she is romantically attracted to Holmes. This version of Adler has spent a significant amount of time in the spotlight, according to Mycroft Holmes, who tells Holmes that she has had affairs with political figures and a famous author. Another important trait this Adler possesses is that she is British, not American like the original Adler. While this is a major character change, the story takes place in the present, implying that women in Europe are no longer subjected to the typical Victorian female archetypes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Much like the original “Bohemia” story, “Belgravia” begins with Holmes and Watson being summoned to Buckingham Palace where a female member of the Royal Family asks

them to handle a delicate, yet urgent scandal. He informs them that his recent romantic liaison with a dominatrix ended with scandalous and compromising images of him being taken. The Royal tells Holmes and Watson that fixing scandal and retrieving the photographs is of national importance. Though the show's writers do not reveal why they chose to change the character of the Royal member from a man to a woman, it is a major plot/character twist for Adler. Also, unlike the King of Bohemia, this member of the Royal Family is not in the process of getting married; however, she worries that the release of the photographs would damage the reputation of the entire Family.

Upon meeting Adler, Holmes immediately notices her attraction to him. At one point in their meetings, she even tells him, "I would have you, right here, on this desk, until you begged for mercy twice" (Sherlock 2012). When Holmes and Watson arrive at Adler's residence, they attempt to gain access without her noticing, but Adler is one step ahead of them and opens the door, allowing them entry. It is important to note that the camera previously showed Adler trying to find the right outfit to meet the men with, but when she opens the door, her hair and makeup are fully done, but she is completely naked. This tactic throws off Holmes, who visited Adler with the intent of trying to "figure her out" but he is unable to come to any conclusions.

Chaos ensues when Watson attempts to create a diversion and Holmes tries to retrieve the images from Adler's phone. The following scenes include several parallels to the original "Bohemia." Watson sets off a fire alarm and Holmes immediately notices that the location of the camera phone is in a safe with other important information. When Holmes finally acquires the phone, Adler drugs him. When he wakes, he finds that he is back at his

apartment, and that Adler has put her information into his phone and every time his phone rings, a unique ringtone lets him know she is calling.

It is not until six months later that Holmes realizes that Adler has sent him the camera phone in order for him to hide it. This leads him to believe that Adler is dead, knowing she would never give up the phone so easily. His suspicions are confirmed when he sees Adler's body in a morgue; however, the audience soon learns that Adler faked her death to throw off her enemies, and Holmes is aware of her presence. When Holmes and Adler are in his apartment some time after, she takes advantage of his growing curiosity of her by sending sensitive information to his rival, Moriarty. Holmes seems hopelessly deceived by Adler at this point and even goes as far as refusing to help her when she is at her most vulnerable. It is later revealed by Mycroft Holmes to Watson that terrorists beheaded Adler and that the truth should be withheld from Holmes, who seemingly accepts the lie that she has entered the witness protection program, while reminiscing over the messages exchanged between him and Adler. Unbeknownst to Mycroft and Watson and revealed only through flashbacks, Sherlock was able to infiltrate Adler's holding cell and save her from execution. Her compromising images with the Royal member imply that Adler is interested in women; however, her attraction to Holmes confirms that she is either attracted to both men and women or she separates her romantic feelings from her workplace. Either way, this is problematic because the writers of the show poorly suggest Adler (who is only attracted to women) that Holmes can seduce her.

Another interesting point in the episode is the self-indulgent personality Adler has; when Holmes is trying to figure out the code to her safe, the combination ends up being her body measurements. Her self-confidence is further explored when the ringtone she programs

on Holmes' phone to go off when she contacts him is the sound of a woman making noises of a sexual nature. She also taunts Holmes' lack of sexual experience and relationship expertise. Throughout the episode, Adler continuously taunts Holmes, drawing him in to her, even though she persistently denies that she is attracted to him. However, both Holmes and the viewers note Adler's "tells" whenever she is with him: her pupils dilate, her vocal tone shifts, and she develops an elevated pulse. Her inability to separate her growing feelings for Holmes from her business prove that she has a weakness, thus shattering her image as the ultimate dominatrix.

The episode "Belgravia" premiered on January 1, 2012, to a plethora of criticism. Understandably, certain plot changes needed to be made in order to accommodate the new, modern format of the show; however, critics and Holmes experts felt the drastic changes butchered an original feminist character. Some argued that the original story had more inclusive gender politics than its modern counterpart, while others chastised the romantic relationship between Adler and Holmes (Derwin n.p.). What made Doyle's "Bohemia" work was the absence of lust and romance, allowing Adler to compete on the same level as Holmes' male adversaries, without the expectation of something more from their relationship. Stephen Moffat, "Belgravia's" writer, was further criticized for the lack of feminism in an already feminist story.

The problem with "Belgravia" is the lack of character fidelity. The original story shows a clever and resourceful Adler one step ahead of Holmes throughout their journey. While *Sherlock* initially shows Adler in the same manner, it is clear that the show runners are trying to elicit some sort of sexual tension between Adler and Holmes, with Adler meeting Holmes for the first time completely and unnecessarily naked. She then proceeds to let her

guard down in Holmes' presence, something the original Adler never did, which allows Holmes to read her every move from then on. He notices her pupils dilate and her pulse increases whenever she is in his presence and chastises her for letting love cloud her judgment (something he would never do). Only after Adler's feelings for Holmes are confirmed is she defeated; he figures out that the password to her telephone is an abbreviation of his name, "Sher." The ultimate downfall of the episode is its ending: Holmes is flirtatiously reading the banter texts between him and Adler and remembers how he saved her from death. This is yet another negative trait Adler possesses: she continuously messages Holmes, asking him to dinner over twenty times, desperately waiting for him to answer, even telling him "Oh for God's sake, let's have dinner." Throughout the episode, Adler goes from a character with unlimited potential to a typical damsel in distress. She is even narcissistic, making the code to her safe her body measurements and assuming that Holmes will remember them when he is forced to open it.

Jane Jones, author of "Is Sherlock Sexist," argues that "Belgravia" is among the more regressive portrayals of Adler. She notes the lack of gender evolution, stating, "you've got to worry when a woman comes off worse in 2012 than 1891" (Jones 2). She criticizes Moffat's "fetishisation" of the damsel in distress storyline, saying that it is completely against Adler's original character. Adler, a "proto-feminist" or a woman who is extremely intelligent and possesses agency, is betrayed by a flawed storyline that diminishes her role as "the Woman" who outsmarts Holmes. The agency she possesses to fight for herself and move about in the world without the help of a man is stripped by Moffat's attempt to pair her with Holmes in a romantic setting. Jones credits Moffat with allowing Adler to maintain her intelligence, independence, and power. However, just because she possesses these qualities does not

necessarily mean she uses them throughout the episode. Moffat uses Adler's capabilities not for the purpose to get ahead, but rather to be an expert in "what men like" (5). The occupation of "Dominatrix" functions in way that allows Adler to act as a seductress, rather than a successful person. She uses her feminine wiles and sexuality to use men and their wants and needs in order to manipulate them.

The ultimate crime Moffat commits towards Adler is the fact that she does not outwit Holmes and ends up needing him to save her. He also makes a poor character choice when Adler, who is identified as someone who is attracted to women, reveals her attraction to Holmes. Not only does Moffat strip Adler of the characteristics that separate her from the woman who outsmarts Holmes, but he makes her vulnerable. The beauty of Adler's character in Doyle is the effort she makes to not let romance cloud her mind. Jones also points out that even Holmes notes the shifting personality of Adler at the end of the episode, saying, "Sentiment is a chemical defect found in the losing side" (8). The damsel in distress, love-struck storyline might work for another character, but the unique independence Adler possesses is the reason her character is relevant today. If she were like any of the other female characters in the series, it is likely that she would have been remembered as another woman who needed to be saved, rather than the reputation she built for herself.

#### *ELEMENTARY*- NATALIE DORMER

The most unusual portrayal of Irene Adler is the amalgam of Adler and Jamie Moriarty (Jamie being the new, gender neutral name for the character), played by Natalie Dormer, in *Elementary*. She is first introduced in Season One through Sebastian Moran, a villain who uses a lethal modus operandi that was also present at the scene where Adler's "death" had occurred prior to his run in with Holmes. Moran asserts his innocence by saying

he was in prison at the time of Adler's murder, and he claims that Moriarty killed Adler. Prior to this, it is revealed that Moriarty, a woman, has been Holmes' nemesis since before the series began. Holmes had averted her plans on several occasions while working at Scotland Yard, which forced Moriarty to create an alternate identity in the form of Irene Adler to study and seduce him. Once Holmes falls for Adler, Moriarty stages her death and leaves a note signed "M" which sends Holmes spiraling into a period of drug addiction.

Additionally, in this Sherlock universe, Moriarty/Adler is more manipulative than any other portrayal. She leads Holmes and Watson to a mansion where they find her as "Adler" and it makes it seem as though she had been held captive. Sherlock brings her to his home to recover, and she uses this advantage to trick Holmes into wanting to elope with her. Upon discovering minor inconsistencies with "Adler" Holmes questions her and the two end their relationship. When one of Moriarty's men attempts to assassinate Holmes, she saves him and then reveals that she is in fact his arch nemesis. Though the two still interact with each other, Holmes is reluctant from then on to trust Moriarty as she has played on his weaknesses. When Holmes apparently overdoses in the next episode, Moriarty visits Holmes and in a moment of weakness, lets her guard down and offers to heal him and take him away. At this moment, Holmes gains the upper hand on Moriarty by revealing that Watson has also figured out her ruse and that her love for Holmes has led to her demise. The episode ends with Moriarty's arrest for the rest of the season.

"Yours is the only opinion I trust" is the opening message in a letter Holmes receives from Moriarty in the second season. It is also revealed that while she is in prison, there is an exchange of several letters between her and Holmes. The last Moriarty is seen is when she escapes from prison by cutting the stun bracelets on her wrists and slitting her skin

along the way. Holmes and Watson carry her to safety and anticipate that she will recover and leave behind the world of crime, then rescue her. Moriarty is only mentioned briefly in the third season when Holmes reads a letter from her implying that an “unfolding game between her and Holmes” is upon them, meaning that their interactions are far from over.

The error in this adaptation is the effect “Adler” has on Holmes. In the original “Bohemia” it can be argued that by the end of the story, Holmes is transfixed by Adler, but in a completely platonic way. Carole Nelson Douglas, author of the Irene Adler fan fiction book series, writes in “Why Can’t They Get Irene Adler Right?” that *Elementary* is yet another television portrayal that unsuccessfully captures the essence of Adler. She describes Adler as “gutsy, empathetic, and clever” and that these qualities were what Holmes admired most about her (22). In *Elementary*, Adler/Moriarty is manipulative, violent, and a femme fatale. Douglas also criticizes the show runners for casting Dormer, an actress known for her seductive roles. She believes that it is possible for a re-imagining of Adler to be successful and faithful to the original character because she has done so with her successful book series. The only positive aspect of this representation, according to Nelson, is that the writers had a moment of gender defiance by blending the typically male character of Professor Moriarty with the female Adler. This attempt to prove that a woman can defeat Holmes, though, is overshadowed by the lack of character fidelity the writers give to Adler’s character. The process of sexualizing and criminalizing Adler is the most frustrating part of Dormer’s portrayal. She is Holmes’ long-lost love and his archenemy at the same time and Holmes even admits, “The great love of my life is a homicidal maniac. No one’s perfect.” Like Pulver’s Adler, it is Dormer’s Adler that is ultimately betrayed by her feelings for Holmes. She let’s her guard down and while trying to outwit Holmes, Moriarty realizes that she did

care for him all along. Even though she is a lethal criminal in this version, everything Adler/Moriarty has worked for to defeat Holmes is useless because romance takes precedence over her mission and compromises her ability to get the job done. In defense of the episodes, Nelson says that chemistry between two characters can happen even without the show runners trying, but in the case of *Elementary*, the chemistry between Adler and Holmes as romantic partners is nonexistent yet forced upon the viewers throughout the show. According to Nelson, the only time that chemistry is evident between the two characters is when they are trying to defeat the other one, but the writers fail to capitalize on that, instead focusing on the (non existent) sexual tension of Moriarty and Holmes.

#### *SHERLOCK HOLMES*-RACHEL MCADAMS

Considering the fact that the total gross income for this film is \$524 million dollars (Warner Bros.), *Sherlock Holmes* (2009) is most likely the platform with the most recognized adaptation of Irene Adler. Played by Rachel McAdams, Adler is introduced as the American thief and occasional adversary of Sherlock Holmes who would on several occasions work for Professor Moriarty. She was born in New Jersey and, upon arriving in Europe she became a romantic associate of the King of Bohemia. Prior to the events of the film, Adler has already divorced her husband, claiming he was not who she thought he was, but is jealous and boring and a clinical snorer. This clears the way for a relationship between Adler and Holmes, and it is heavily suggested that the two have had romantic encounters prior to the events of the film.

The first time Adler is on screen is when she is attempting to wake up Sherlock after he has been in a deep slumber. After it becomes clear that they are familiar with each other's company, several notable scenes suggest a brief yet significant affair between the two. While

she examines the detailed file of her crimes that Holmes has kept, he reaches down into her dress to ask if the diamond necklace is another trophy from her thievery. Holmes attempts to hide the framed photograph of Adler on his table that was a gift from the King, only for her to notice it when she is leaving. Adler proceeds to ask Holmes for his help in finding someone and when she gives him the information, it is in an envelope from “The Grand Hotel” where she is staying and she tells Holmes, “ remember the Grand? They gave me our old room.”

There are several issues with this scene, but the ultimate betrayal to Adler’s original character is that she is asking Holmes for help. In defense of the film, there are some scenes that are faithful to the original story. Adler is seen in male clothes when she, Holmes, and Watson are trying to defeat their nemesis. She is also a source of wisdom for Holmes, who asks her for advice and help in several scenes. However, this is not enough to compensate for the hyper sexualized scenes that Adler is placed in with Holmes. Like *Elementary*, there is yet again another scene in the film where Adler is naked in front of Holmes in order to get his attention. She appears in a towel and while Holmes is watching her, she drops her towel and heads towards a partition to put on a robe that is still quite revealing. She is aware that she is compromising Holmes’ mindset and still proceeds to drug him with a sedative, kiss him, and ask him to go away with her. This is a clear tell of her dependency on Holmes, which proves to be problematic when she is caught in a near fatal situation. Perhaps the most uncharacteristic scene in the film is when Adler is found with her arms tied to a conveyer belt behind a line of slaughtered pigs waiting to be cut in half by an electric blade. Like a typical damsel in distress, she must wait for Watson and Holmes to deduce that by having the three of them pull against the conveyer belt, it would break and set her free. Even after the belt

breaks, Adler is about to be fatally cut by the blade and, Holmes, who grabs her and pulls her back, rescues her once more.

The film continues with Adler joining Holmes and Watson as they attempt to stop Blackwood and his men attempt to take control of London. The climax and resolution of the film is perhaps the best representation of Adler's capabilities. Holmes and Watson utilize her assistance, and she serves as an equal counterpart; she disables a cyanide device, and along with Holmes, lures Blackwood to his death. The end of the film suggests that Adler will continue to see Holmes, whether for a romantic encounter or as an adversary in his detective work. The second film, *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011), showed potential for the growth of Adler's character, but within the first ten minutes, Moriarty successfully lures, poisons and kills Adler. Holmes and Moriarty only briefly mention her throughout the rest of the film.

By killing off Adler at the hands of Moriarty early in the second movie, her character is reduced to a concept commonly known as "fridging" (Or, women in refrigerators). This is the process of hurting, torturing, or killing off a female character towards the beginning of the film in order to progress the development of her male counterpart. Holmes spends the entirety of the film trying to avenge her death, only to end up bettering his personality by the end of the movie. Adler's demise in the film is caused by her love for Holmes. When Professor Moriarty and Adler meet to discuss the assassination of a doctor, he realizes that her love for Holmes is likely to compromise her.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

In Doyle's story "The Five Orange Pips" Sherlock Holmes is reminded of his defeats. He admits that he has only been defeated four times: thrice by men and once by a woman. The effect of Irene Adler lingers with Holmes for years after the events of "Bohemia." Her impact on Holmes is not due to the romantic yearning he has for her; rather, it is the fact that her sleuthing left him completely shocked. She played his game better than he could have and was always one step ahead of him.

The evidence is clear when analyzing the comparisons between the original "Bohemia" and the modern portrayals of Irene Adler: despite being written during a time when women were thought of as the weaker gender, the story manages to be a more feminist and progressive representation of Adler than the countless rewrites of her character. Nevertheless, despite the lack of progression with each of these portrayals, one must appreciate the inclusivity of a positive female character in a predominantly male literary world. This inclusivity is a testament to Adler's ability to transcend each adaptation as both an individual and independent character. She is adaptable, independent, and a figure of the few women in the Sherlock Holmes universe to make such a significant impact. Hatch and Jones, authors of "Adapting Irene Adler," best describe her impact on literature, film, and television: "The same is true of the other [versions of] Adler; Holmes and the readers come to understand her as a character by what she does, not as she is described" (Hatch and Jones 22). They claim that she exists in three different forms: social, literary, and individual. She takes on the roles of housewife, detective, femme fatale, and master of disguise, but the most important characteristic is always a part of her every role: her adaptability.

Hatch and Jones also argue in defense of filmmakers, saying that even though the modern representations of Adler can be unnecessary and convoluted, they offer new a medium through which to view such an intricate character. Since Adler only appears in one story, it is expected of filmmakers to want to explore her capabilities and maybe even explore how she would act in an new or altered storyline. Hatch and Jones' primary argument is that Irene Adler is not simply just a character: "This study of Adler suggests a character is not merely a name, a collection of adjectives, and textual signifiers, but that they are accompanied by transtextual expectations based on hypotextual structures, which give characters their fundamental shapes and allows them to be, in addition to semiotic forms, hypothetical people who are not tied down to a specific narrative" (23).

Hatch and Jones also identify the most significant themes throughout the original "Bohemia." They believe that the role of Adler can be understood through four different themes: independence, society and class, romance, and gender performance. Adler's independence allows her to stand out in Europe as a woman who may threaten the Victorian norms, but she is still educated enough to have the etiquette and mannerisms of a respectable woman. Her place in society and class allows her to "move about and manipulate social roles and hierarchy" (7). The romantic aspect is somewhat convoluted because many might assume that there is a romance between Adler and Holmes, when in fact it is between her and her husband, which grounds her and establishes her character as a professional. Finally, the gender performance of Adler is the most unique theme because her defiance of gender roles allows her to function from one role to another. The film and television episodes briefly touch on Adler's independence, but as a whole they fail to capture the essence of Adler that is so prominent in the story. Rather than focusing on her capabilities, they force a

relationship between Adler and Holmes and they turn her into a seductress, when she is simply a detective who is good at what she does. Understandably, every filmmaker will have a different approach to a character, but the work only functions when the character fidelity is more significant than the changes to the character.

The most common mistake that filmmakers have with adapting Irene Adler is their decision to scandalize her. Hatch and Jones rebuke these writers for creating such a regressive character. They state that Doyle, who wrote the story while somewhat, adhering to the expectations of the Victorian women, is successful while modern day writers have failed to create a version of Adler where her adventurous nature is not scandalous. Whether it is Guy Ritchie's version of Adler, who is a notorious thief and comfortable with public nudity, or Moffat's amalgam of Adler and Moriarty who uses mind games and seduction to manipulate Holmes, the failure to create an independent female character who does not have to fall in love with her male counterpart is evident with each adaptation. These adaptations, all re-written by male writers, push Adler to be a femme fatale and someone who utilizes her sexuality rather than her intelligence, which is problematic when trying to remain faithful to the canon story.

Irene Adler is arguably one of the first feminist characters to come out of Victorian literature (Aviram 52). She is a pioneer in breaking the mold of the female Victorian archetype, and whether it was Doyle's intention to juxtapose a progressive character like Adler with a staunch traditional character like Holmes or not, we do not know. The ability to portray Adler in a number of media gives viewers the chance to see a woman stand out and outsmart the most intelligent detective ever known. However, the lack of character fidelity in these three portrayals essentially pushes Adler back in the fight for equality. The voluptuous,

seductive, and conniving woman on the screen is not the intelligent, quick-witted, and fair woman Doyle wrote about one hundred and twenty-eight years ago. Perhaps, in this day and age when young girls are in desperate need for strong female leaders, it is better to put media to the side and turn to the past to see the best portrayal of "The Woman."

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## VITA

Adriana Romero  
311 N. Bartlett Ave., Laredo, Texas 78043  
(956) 763-9773 [romeroa@alumni.southwestern.edu](mailto:romeroa@alumni.southwestern.edu)

**Education**

BA in Cultural Anthropology, May 2016  
Southwestern University, Georgetown, Texas  
-Specialty in archival research and digitization

**Mentoring/Tutoring**

Upward Bound Student Mentor August 2013-May 2016

- Tutored first generation college students in several areas of study

**Internships**

Webb County District Attorneys Office May 2014-August 2015

- Mentored by Attorneys over the course of two summers
- Acted as lead intern for incoming interns second summer
- Assisted on several cases for Attorneys

Latina History Project-Southwestern University January 2014-May 2016

- Digitally archived paper material onto online exhibit
- Facilitated construction of physical exhibit on campus
- Acted as liaison between students and exhibit

**Educational Conferences**

Latin American Border Studies Symposium- Southwestern University March 2016

- Presented findings on Latina History Project
- Presented results of research
- Participated in Question/Answer panel

Student Works Symposium-Southwestern University February 2016

- Presented findings on Latina History Project
- Participated in Question/Answer panel

Margaret Schilling Lecture- Southwestern University February 2016

- Selected as student panelist for “A Night with Sister Mary Helen Prejean”
- Facilitated question/answer session with students and key note speaker

**Honors/Awards**

- Sigma Tau Delta (English Honor Society) Inductee May 2018
- Robert Davidson Scholarship Recipient-\$40,000 May 2012-May 2016