

# The Final Problem: Constructing Coherence in the Holmesian Canon

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**Abstract:** The death and resurrection of Sherlock Holmes, a contrarian reading in which Holmes helps the murderer, and the century-long tradition of the Holmesian Great Game with its pseudo-scholarly readings in light of an ironic conviction that Holmes is real and Arthur Conan Doyle merely John Watson's literary agent. This paper relies on these events in the afterlife of Sherlock Holmes in order to trace an outline of the author function as it applies to the particular case of Doyle as the author of the Sherlock Holmes stories. The operations of the author function can be hard to identify in the encounter with the apparently natural unity of the individual work, but these disturbances at the edges of the function make its effects more readily apparent. This article takes as its starting point the apparently strong author figure of the Holmesian Great Game, in which "the canon" is delineated from "apocrypha" in pseudo-religious vocabulary. It argues that while readers willingly discard provisional readings in the face of an incompatible authorial text, the sanctioning authority of the author functions merely as a boundary for interpretation, not as a personal-biographical control over the interpretation itself. On the contrary, the consciously "writerly" reading of the text serves to reinforce the reliance on the text as it is encountered. The clear separation of canon from apocrypha, with the attendant reinforced author function, may have laid the ground not only for the acceptance of contrarian reading, but also for the creation of apocryphal writings like pastiche and fan fiction.

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Petty thefts, wanton assaults, purposeless outrage—to the man who  
held the clue all could be worked out into one connected whole.  
(Doyle *Return* 26)

For well over a century, Holmesians and Sherlockians have played their Great Game, showing how what might to the untrained eye appear as inconsistencies or errors in the text can instead be read as traces of a wider coherence.<sup>1</sup> In his "Studies in the Literature

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<sup>1</sup> To quote William S. Baring-Gould, "English Sherlockians like to call themselves Holmesians; American Holmesians like to call themselves Sherlockians" (Baring-Gould "Literature on the Subject" n3, 24). Either describes an avid reader of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories, and more particularly those engaged in the Game. With the popularity of the Baker Street Irregulars, which are in their origin American, "Sherlockian" has been somewhat in ascendancy. However, with the newer developments of Sherlock Holmes fandom and its adoption of the word "Sherlockian" as an identifier, it might be useful to

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of Sherlock Holmes" (1911), Ronald A. Knox writes what amounts to a manifesto for what would develop into the Game:

If there is anything pleasant in life, it is doing what we aren't meant to do. If there is anything pleasant in criticism, it is finding out what we aren't meant to find out. It is the method by which we treat as significant what the author did not mean to be significant, by which we single out as essential what the author regarded as incidental. ... There is, however, a special fascination in applying this method to Sherlock Holmes, because it is, in a sense, Holmes' own method. "It has long been an axiom of mine," he says, "that the little things are infinitely the most important". (Knox 145-6)

In a parody of biblical exegesis (and with a smattering of fictional authorities) Knox develops the argument that Holmes really did die at Reichenbach, and that the post-Reichenbach stories are therefore a forgery (perpetrated by Dr Watson). Later Holmesians have used the method to probe the many inconsistencies in the Holmesian canon, constructing new connections and stories in the gaps. At the heart of this endeavour is the stated conviction that Sherlock Holmes lived, John H. Watson wrote the stories of his adventures, and Arthur Conan Doyle served solely as the latter's Literary Agent. Michael Saler writes that "Holmes was the first character in modern literature to be widely treated as if he were real and his creator fictitious" (Salter 600), and describes those playing the Game as "'ironic believers', who were not so much willingly suspending their disbelief in a fictional character as willingly believing in him with the double-minded awareness that they were engaged in pretence" (606). The performance of the Game entails a close, pseudo-scholarly reading of the texts with a view to uncover internal contradictions which may in turn serve as building blocks for the active construction of alternative and additional plots. A classic example is Dr Watson's claim that he has been shot in the shoulder, which would seem at odds with his occasional complaints about his wounded leg; another is his apparent inability to keep track of his wives. In both cases, the inattention of a writer could serve as serviceable explanations for details which will generally be seen as incidental to the plot. Holmesians have, however, produced endless speculations about the possibilities for multiple wounds and wives and any implications these might have for events on the battlefield or the internal chronology of the canon.

This article takes as its starting point the apparently strong author function of the Holmesian Game, in which "the canon" is delineated from "the apocrypha" in pseudo-religious vocabulary. It argues, however, that this authorial authority functions primarily as a sanction for the boundary of interpretation, not as any personal-biographical control over the act of interpretation itself. The Holmesian fiction of Arthur Conan Doyle as the Literary Agent serves to separate out the Holmes canon from Doyle's other writings, but it is also fruitful in its removal of the text from the problematic

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return to "Holmesian" as a designation for the more text- and Game-oriented fan, hence the choice of this article.

biography of a fallible and inattentive author. In order to understand these particular instances of reading as part of a wider field, the article will tie them to related attempts to theorise the reading of plotted texts and show that similar underlying premises of reading and authorship are present in both: the author serves as the authority which circumscribes the text, and sanctions the active construction of unexpected meaning within it.

The aim of this article is not to arrive at an idea of a universal conception of “The Author”, still less any normative conception of the attitude to such a figure; it is to trace the outline of what might following Michel Foucault be called an “author-function” (Foucault 125), as akin to a fuzzy set in which the attitude to any one selection of texts will vary, but generally form part of a larger trend. Its main concern is to study particular instances of this function's expression around “Arthur Conan Doyle”, specifically as a unifying figure of the Sherlock Holmes canon.<sup>2</sup> The operations of the author-function can be hard to identify in the encounter with the apparently natural unity of the individual work, but a look at the disturbances at the edges of the function makes it possible to trace an outline.

Through a short discussion of reactions to Holmes' death and resurrection, this article will begin by demonstrating the unifying function of the author as it becomes visible in the publication history of the texts and the attendant reactions from the public. The second part of the article, centred on how Pierre Bayard's *Sherlock Holmes Was Wrong* (2008) constructs a new plot within the text of *Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902), will show that the authorial function of providing the foundation for meaning does not necessarily entail a passive acceptance of a perceived authorial interpretative intention; rather, the text of the Holmes “canon” serves as a sanctioned whole from which meaning can be actively constructed. The third and final part will discuss how this is performed in the century of textual production that is the Holmesian Great Game, and what the active work of an interpretative community to read coherence into an apparently incoherent text says about the author as a unifying figure. It will show that the Holmesian resistance to authorial biography and interpretative control depends on an all the stronger reliance on the sanctioning authority of the author; and conversely, this strong reliance on authorial sanction is only possible through the rejection of authorial biography and interpretative authority.

## The Significance of Reichenbach

... the gentleman vanishes, never never to reappear. (Doyle *Life* 319)

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<sup>2</sup> The authorial text in this instance is the text as published, and the author referred to is not a historical individual, but rather a figure used to make sense of the product of a writer and a publication process. Christopher Pittard's excellent analysis of how *The Strand* stories fell into line with George Newnes' project of providing a wholesome reading experience by reducing the sensational aspects of the stories (and in turn reintroduce the sensational as Newnes' competition increased), and how the descriptions of Holmes adapted to Paget's illustrations (Pittard 6, 10, 14). In addition, Peter D. McDonald's discussion of the negotiations between A. P. Watts, Arthur Conan Doyle and Herbert Greenhough Smith shows the considerations that informed Watt's decision to send the first story to *The Strand* (McDonald 23). Taken together, these two articles give an indication of some of the many outside processes and outright coincidences that shaped the Holmes stories.

The import of the ending to “The Final Problem” changed irrevocably when Arthur Conan Doyle wrote “The Empty House” in 1903. Following Holmes’ meeting with Moriarty in December 1893, he was presumed dead not only by a multitude of grieving readers, but to all appearances by his creator as well: In a letter to his mother, Doyle very emphatically states that “the gentleman vanishes, never never to reappear” (Doyle *Life* 319), and his diary notes “Killed Holmes” (Green 66). Perhaps more importantly, the text itself strongly suggested that the detective was dead, encouraging the interpretation through an illustration on the page facing the very beginning of the story, captioned “The Death of Sherlock Holmes” (Doyle “Final Problem” 558). While the stories of crowds of mourners wearing black armbands are most likely apocryphal, there is no shortage of newspapers reporting both that Holmes was dead and the reactions of distraught readers. The conclusion was not unanimous: *Punch* did note the lack of an eyewitness “whose veracity is unimpeachable” and declared that “[t]hat he will turn up again no student of detective history and the annals of crime can possibly doubt” (“Picklock Holes” 301), whereas *Harper’s* stated that Holmes “through the intervention of one Doyle, a physician, who had a claim upon him” had met his end, seeing the proof of Holmes’ demise as “almost absolute” (Martin 1191). It noted that “his many admirers will hope”, but considered it more likely that Mycroft would be stirred by his brother’s death into a life of increased activity (Martin 1191). An article in the *American Bookman*, meanwhile, gave a remarkably accurate summary of events as they would be revealed, already in July 1901 (“Chronicle and Comment” 409). Holmes’ state, then was rather akin to that of Schrödinger’s unfortunate cat.

Following the publication of “The Empty House”, however, Holmes had always only been in hiding, travelling in Tibet under the name Sigerson. Those who had thought otherwise, including Doyle himself, had been mistaken. Holmes had died at Reichenbach; now he never did, and “The Final Problem” ends with Holmes out of sight but no longer dead. The new information forced a revision of the reading because the text that had been finished a few years earlier was now continuing; the authorially sanctioned addition to the text had implications for how that which had gone before could be read. The new authorial text postpones and alters the end and reintroduces the necessity for the reader to revise their understanding of events according to this new information.<sup>3</sup>

The process I have described is not particular to the Holmes stories: every new textual segment potentially shapes and limits the potential interpretations of the first-

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<sup>3</sup> On the whole, readers accepted the author’s authority to posit the ending he chose to the text, regardless of any perception of original intention. There were, however, some apparent attempts to negotiate a sense of inauthenticity (e.g. Knox). These appear as an early prefiguring of the “fix-it” style of fan fiction, which rebels against part of the authorial text that cannot be accommodated in an existing “headcanon” and therefore writes an alternative (see Pugh 199). The exploration of the extent to which a sense of inauthenticity caused by the hiatus influenced the creation of the Game falls outside the scope of this article, but it would seem that it was certainly a contributing factor.

time reader.<sup>4</sup> The reader's movement through the text has been described and theorised in various ways. Peter Brooks observes that the reader reads "in a spirit of confidence ... that what remains to be read will restructure the provisional readings of the already read" (Brooks 23). That is to say, readers read as if the text has been structured with the end in view. Frank Kermode illustrates precisely this when he writes that "[i]n a novel, the beginning implies the end: if you seem to begin at the beginning, ... you are in fact beginning at the end; all that seems fortuitous and contingent in what follows is in fact reserved for a later benefaction of significance in some concordant structure" (Kermode 148). Kermode's claim portrays a care and discrimination in the writing of texts which is not necessarily present in all, if any. The importance of the passage, however, lies in precisely its illustration of a *perception* that the text has been carefully planned with the end in view, and that this end has provided the criteria of selection which dictate what is made available to the reader.

Both Brooks and Kermode reach for pseudo-Aristotelian terms when attempting to explain the importance of the end to the act of reading: Kermode borrows *peripeteia* to describe a text's use of the reader's expectations for the end in order to provide a "disconfirmation followed by consonance" (Kermode 18); Brooks speaks of the moment of recognition or insight, *anagnorisis*, at the end of the text (Brooks 92). The emphasis in the former is on the twist or misdirection which takes the narrative away from its predictable path, that of the latter is on the flash of insight when the whole plot becomes visible and the truth can be distinguished from misdirection: According to both, we read "in anticipation of retrospection" (Brooks 23), in the expectation of the backwards glance at the end of narrative when all has been revealed, which Kermode calls the reader's "confidence in the end" (Kermode 18), a confidence that the end will confer meaning on what has gone before. The authority to sanction an end or an addition to a text then becomes the authority to sanction the boundaries of meaning.

Misdirection, disconfirmation, is at the heart of these descriptions. The type of plot Kermode and Brooks (and Aristotle) find most interesting is the plot which deceives, only to provide a surprising revelation that causes a retrospective illumination of what has gone before, disconfirming the provisional understanding of the first-time reader, but leading to an impression of consonance within the text as a whole.<sup>5</sup> They describe a reader who wants to be *surprised*, and who relies for that surprise on a difference between the end the reader imagines and the end they find in their meeting with the text. And the condition for that surprise then becomes an authorial text that arrives from the outside: The author is the only one allowed to, expected to, surprise us.

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<sup>4</sup> And until a text is complete, all readers are in the position of the first-time reader, lacking an ending from which they can look back and close off their provisional interpretations.

<sup>5</sup> The effects described by Brooks and Kermode are recognisable as the operations of Roland Barthes' hermeneutic code, which works because the reader is throughout provided with false clues (a convict on the moor, the possibility of a spectral dog executing a family curse) alongside the ones that point towards the truth to be revealed in the end. The directionality of the hermeneutic code promises that meaning, the truth, will be revealed in the end: "truth, these narratives tell us, is what is *at the end* of expectation. ... Truth is what completes, what closes" (Barthes 76). The disparate functions of the hermeneutic code are therefore only visible to the re-reader: Only knowledge gained from the revelation of the enigma allows us to distinguish what Barthes calls a "snare" from a "partial answer" (Barthes 75).

While the story of Scheherazade indicates that the desire for the “correct”, authorially sanctioned end to a story is not limited to the detective story, it should not be controversial to suggest that the type of text both Brooks and Kermode are describing finds its purest expression in that genre. And the desire for the end relies on a confidence that the text as a whole has been structured with the end in view: The reader’s confidence in the end is a confidence in the author as plotter. It is this anticipation of retrospection, based in this confidence in the authorial ending, whether justified or not, that underlies the provisional restructuring of the plot which the first-time reader performs while progressing through the text. Reading is a continuous attempt to pre-empt the illumination of the backwards glance at the end of narrative, in which the relevance of the seemingly unconnected becomes apparent. It requires submitting to the new information in the text in the confidence that there is a plan, and thereby discarding provisional readings that cannot accommodate the new information. Holmes died; Holmes always survived. So far, this would seem to suggest a very strong reliance on the author.

### **The Limits of Authorial Authority**

“What do you think of my theory?”

“It is all surmise.”

“But at least it covers all the facts. When new facts come to our knowledge which cannot be covered by it, it will be time enough to reconsider it.”

(Doyle *Memoirs* 68)

The desire for *anagnorisis*, residing in a confidence in the text perceived as plotted towards an ending, relies on the unifying function of the author: It is only available within a text perceived as authorial. The reader can, however, produce more than one peripeteic plot in the same text, which suggests that the desire for *anagnorisis* is not necessarily limited to a desire for the specific *anagnorisis* intended by the author. This becomes apparent in a reading like the one Pierre Bayard performs in his *Sherlock Holmes Was Wrong*, in which he constructs a new plot in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. While Bayard’s plot is constructed in opposition to the apparent plot of the novel, the aim is still a closure through an ordered plot which relies on the authorial text. This is important in this context because it disturbs any facile connection between the author’s intended plot and the satisfaction of *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*.

Bayard relies on basic narratological analysis to open the text to his new reading. He observes that *Hound* only provides the imperfect Watson’s take on events: the narrative “does not relate the actions that occurred on the Devonshire moor or the investigation of Sherlock Holmes; it relates only these actions *as Dr. Watson perceived them*” (Bayard 71). As Watson’s erroneous hypotheses are a convention in their own right, his endorsement of Holmes cannot be taken as the endorsement of an authority. Nor is the reader compelled to accept Holmes’ version of events, as the plausibility of the

explanation, and Holmes' authority as a master detective is only proof of its probability; and seen in the context of stories like "The Man With the Twisted Lip" and "The Yellow Face", this probability becomes suspect.<sup>6</sup> Bayard also emphasises *Hound's* reliance on multiple narratives, not all of which are independently corroborated: "Watson often entrusts the narration to other characters, allowing their voices to tell the story. But their statements are often not directly verifiable" (Bayard 75). In fact, most of them are potential suspects. With this foundation Bayard goes on to produce a contrarian reading that opens the text up to a plot in which "the victim in Conan Doyle's book is executed with the complicity of Holmes, without the murderer ever being bothered" (Bayard 163): Bayard's new plot is one in which Charles Baskerville's death is an accident which Beryl Stapleton uses in order to have her husband killed so that she can marry Henry Baskerville. The new solution is reinforced by providing another layer of intratextual coherence, as the reading of the plot is supported by a thematic consonance: She serves as a counterpoint to the woman killed by the Baskerville in the legend related by Dr Mortimer (Bayard 187; Doyle *Hound* 13).

In the construction of this new plot, Bayard does not depart from the text of *Hound* as it stands. Nor does he have to discard the genre or the convention of Holmes' own methods.<sup>7</sup> Bayard's reading of *Hound*, in producing a plot that runs counter to the more common reading in which Sherlock Holmes solves the mystery, rather than destroying the pattern of *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*, reinforces it by presenting the more common reading as yet another false clue. However, while he departs from the perceived authorial *anagnorisis*, his strict adherence to the text as he finds it also reintroduces the question of the author's authority over the creation of the foundation for interpretation. The contrarian reading is justified precisely through its coherence with the authorial text and the openings it provides; it is primarily a *reading*, albeit in Barthes' terms a "writerly" one. And it relies for its efficacy on a sanctioned whole from which to read, and a coherence with the very text it resists.

While the text promises a structuration directed towards the end, then, this structuration is open to a contrarian reader unwilling to passively follow the development of the narrative. But significantly, while Bayard is free to read the text against the grain, he does this within the boundaries set by Doyle as author: his emphasis on gaps in the text is merely a recognition of the range of the reader's liberty of interpretation; while he affirms the independence of the characters, his reading of

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<sup>6</sup> In "The Man With the Twisted Lip" Holmes at first comes to the entirely wrong conclusion, informing Mrs St. Clair that he believes her husband to be dead, possibly murdered, when in fact he is alive and well. The most extreme example of Holmes' fallibility, however, is found in "The Yellow Face", in which the entire theory he presents, while covering all the facts, is glaringly wrong to the extent that it is set up as a cautionary tale. When it turns out the truth is rather less sinister than Holmes has theorised, he tells Watson that "if it should ever strike you that I am getting a little over-confident in my powers, or giving less pains to a case than it deserves, kindly whisper 'Norbury' in my ear, and I shall be infinitely obliged to you" (Doyle *Memoirs* 72). Holmes' erroneous inference here gives the reader licence to doubt his uncorroborated but plausible explanations elsewhere, if any were needed.

<sup>7</sup> The solution does not defy logic or plausibility, it follows the logic of *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* in the construction of plot, it eschews a *deus ex machina* solution, and it treats the plot as end-determined. More importantly, the solution is founded in the authorial text.

*Hound* makes it clear that their scope of independent action is limited to those gaps which the text leaves for the reader to fill in. Bayard submits to the author's authority to lay the foundation for this interpretation. He reads the plot of Doyle's book counter to what an in Barthes' terms "readerly" reading would produce, but he never questions the boundary of that reading, what he takes as his starting point: the words of the text. What makes possible Bayard's new plot is precisely the end provided by Doyle, in which Stapleton is (presumed) dead: The plausibility of his reading is based in its consonance with what the authorial text provides. The function of the author, then, is to serve as a boundary for but not a limit to interpretation.

Bayard's approach is grounded in theorists like Barthes and Wolfgang Iser, but his "detective criticism" is not a postmodern, scholarly anomaly in the history of Holmes reception. It bears an uncanny resemblance to the "affectionate dissection" (Smith "Gas Lamp" 3) of the Holmesian Great Game, in which the texts of the Holmes canon are closely analysed and their inconsistencies prodded in order to reveal the wider coherence behind the surface appearance of incoherence. Already on December 18<sup>th</sup> 1893, a notice in the *South Wales Echo* stated that "My own theory is that *Sherlock Holmes is NOT dead*", with an attendant explanation which relies on Watson as an unreliable narrator desirous of marital peace ("Man About Town" 2); Andrew Lang declared the solution to "The Three Students" a hoax in 1904, reading the story as Literature's triumph over Science (Lang 271); and Ronald A. Knox pointed out that "[a]ny studies in Sherlock Holmes must be, first and foremost, studies in Dr. Watson" (147), replacing the personal-biographical author with the fictional narrator as the origin of any inconsistency and thereby reinforcing the reliance on the sanctioned text: Watson is allowed an inattention to proofs and bad handwriting which Arthur Conan Doyle is not, making any error a subtle clue to character rather than an external intrusion on the sanctioned text.<sup>8</sup>

## The Great Game

The rule of the game is that it must be played as solemnly as a county cricket match at Lord's: the slightest touch of extravagance or burlesque ruins the atmosphere. (Sayers "Foreword" 7)

What Sayer calls the "double-consciousness of the ironic imagination" (620) fuels the coherence-making operation of the Holmesian Game, which relies on poking holes in the consistency of the text in order to reconfigure it into new constellations. Despite the perception of the detective genre as formally closed, Doyle does not create a coherent world in which all the Holmes stories easily come together in a coherent whole readily

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<sup>8</sup> See for example Baring-Gould's analysis of Watson ("I Hear of Sherlock" 3-4).

available to what Barthes would call a “readerly” approach to the text. The attempt at coherence-making is therefore anything but a passive activity. There are constant references to stories that are never written and titles that are never used. Conversely, “The Second Stain” is a title Watson assigns to what is apparently two, possibly three different stories (only one of which is provided in narrative form, in 1904, under that title).<sup>9</sup> There are also apparent chronological inconsistencies, such as the treatment of Moriarty in *Valley of Fear* and “The Final Problem”: the internal chronology of the fiction dictates that Watson must have heard Holmes refer to Moriarty in the former before answering Holmes’ question of whether he has heard of him with “Never” in the latter (Doyle *Memoirs* 251). This lack of coherence makes these texts a particularly fertile ground for the study of the approach to the author-sanctioned text as coherent: In a historical-biographical perspective, the inconsistencies are easily identifiable as due to the writing situation being anything but the pure and controlled moment of creation by an autonomous author. But the Great Game requires that the text be approached on its own terms, as a sanctioned whole. While it automatically challenges the interpretative authority in its willingness to dismantle and reconstruct the stories, it therefore simultaneously reinforces the sanctioning authority of the author.

Problems of chronology are frequent targets of Holmesian analysis. The stated internal chronology would place *The Hound of the Baskervilles* shortly after Watson’s marriage, at a time when only *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) had been published,<sup>10</sup> and well before “The Norwood Builder” (1903) which is a post-hiatus story, in which Lestrade finally accepts Holmes as someone to be deferred to (Doyle *Hound* 3, 6). Yet, as Martin D. Dakin points out, Watson appears to be staying in Baker Street; there is no mention of his wife, even when he is unexpectedly asked to set off to Dartmoor for an undefined period of time (Doyle *Hound* 47); both Stapleton and Sir Henry (and the latter has been abroad most of his life) are well aware of who Holmes is, suggesting he is already famous; and Lestrade’s attitude towards Holmes is one of respect and deference (Dakin 147). Watson writes that “I saw at once from the reverential way in which Lestrade gazed at my companion that he had learned a good deal since the days when they had first worked together” (Doyle *Hound* 146). Dakin is not the first to observe these inconsistencies. Several of his points were made by Frank Sedgwick already in January 1902, at a point when only a little over half the novel had been published (Sedgwick). Holmesians have consequently begun to look for reasons why Watson would lie about the date or alter the circumstances. Dakin endorses G. Basil Jones’ explanation that

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<sup>9</sup> It is mentioned in “The Yellow Face”, where it is described as another story in which Holmes “erred and yet the truth was still discovered” (Doyle *Memoirs* 53), while the introduction to “The Naval Treaty” states that “[n]o case ... in which Holmes was ever engaged has illustrated the value of his analytical methods so clearly or has impressed those who were associated with him so deeply” as “the Second Stain” (Doyle *Memoirs* 213). These descriptions appear to be directly contradictory. The quote continues, “I still retain an almost verbatim report of the interview in which he demonstrated the true facts of the case to Monsieur Dubuque of the Paris Police, and Fritz von Waldebaum, the well-known specialist of Dantzig, both of whom had wasted their energies upon what proved to be a side issue” (Doyle *Memoirs* 213). None of the above appear in “The Adventure of the Second Stain”.

<sup>10</sup> Dakin follows the convention of assuming that the timing of Watson’s publications on Holmes are timed simultaneously with Doyle’s publications of the stories.

Holmes was unwilling for the story of the resurrection to be revealed until later and had given Watson permission to write the story of *Hound* only if a fictitious date were set (Dakin 147-49). To corroborate this Dakin quotes Watson's apology to the reader in "The Empty House", in which the latter writes that he has only held back on writing of Holmes' survival and subsequent adventures because Holmes had prohibited it (Dakin 148). It is significant that this explanation does not rely on Doyle as a historical figure, perhaps out of touch with a character he was not particularly invested in to begin with. Rather, it is indicative of a desire to make the text (the Holmes canon) coherent without altering it.

Likewise, when Mrs Watson addresses her husband as "James" in "The Man With the Twisted Lip" (Doyle *Adventures*, 124), the explanations that it is an error of editing (allegedly the response given to Knox when he inquired (Knox 148)) or that it is a slip of the author's pen because he had a friend called Dr James Watson (Lycett 119) are both deemed inadequate by Holmesians: Dorothy L. Sayers offered the theory that it is a pet name used by his wife as an anglicisation of the Scottish Hamish, which she claims must be hidden behind his middle initial "H." (Sayers "Dr Watson" 150). Sayers' theory again illustrates the connective impulse of the Holmesian enterprise: Its authority is based in the ability to connect a problem to another fact, thereby increasing the coherence of the text. Had Watson's middle initial not been known, the speculation would have less effect. Like Bayard's altered plot line, which relies for its confirmation on the thematic connection between the female murderer and the female victim of the Baskervilles, the speculation requires a connection of dots (though some dots may be more tenuous than others),<sup>11</sup> what Dakin calls "a solution which seems to settle the question with the sort of neat click of finality" (148).

Despite the occasional doubt thrown on the canonicity of individual stories,<sup>12</sup> it is generally considered that the canon consists of the 56 short stories and four novels written by Arthur Conan Doyle, while the many stories by other writers which set out to fill in the gaps of untold stories only hinted at in the canon are designated "apocrypha", signifying that they are not capable of confirming or disproving readings of the sanctioned texts. Even Knox, in his apparent rejection of the post-hiatus stories, retains Watson as narrator, thereby accepting the authorial text of Arthur Conan Doyle while imbuing it with an alternative reading (Watson is a liar). The canon/apocrypha distinction is important in its separation of Arthur Conan Doyle's authorship from that of others (including established authors in their own right) writing about the same characters in the same genre and the same or a similar universe.<sup>13</sup> The primary

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<sup>11</sup> The protracted discussions on Mrs Hudson's given name or whether Holmes attended Cambridge or Oxford, for example. E.g. Sayers "Holmes' College Career".

<sup>12</sup> There have been attempts to relegate individual Holmes stories to the category of "apocrypha". Notably D. Martin Dakin's assessment of "The Three Gables", following the reasoning that the plot is derivative and poorly constructed, and Holmes' racism "must make all true Holmesians wriggle with embarrassment" (Dakin 265). This approach was emphatically rejected by Walter Pond: "The only proper attitude for the Sherlockian scholar is to have confidence in the integrity of Dr. Watson and his literary agent and to accord proper respect to all the stories" (39).

<sup>13</sup> The canon does not generally include "The Field Bazaar" (1896) and "How Watson Learned the Trick" (1923), two parodies of Holmes written by Doyle himself.

distinction is the authorial sanction of some texts over others. This suggests a strong acceptance of the figure of the author as a unifying force.

The Great Game also introduces a second distinction, however, in its fiction of the Literary Agent: It claims to reject the authorship status of Doyle, accepting him only as the conduit, the literary agent, of Dr John H. Watson. This fiction is generally discussed in the context of the shift in levels of fictionality, but it also has implications for the author function: Through the introduction of this fiction and the erasure it entails of the historical Arthur Conan Doyle as author, Holmesians can do away with the problematic figure of an author whose life contradicts the apparent ethos of the stories in question (his belief in spirituality and fairies), but it also helps to separate the Holmes canon from other works by the same author (including other fictional work, like the Professor Challenger stories or his historical novels). Finally, the removal of the biographical, fallible author who perhaps took less care than he might have in writing the stories removes the possibility of explaining away the inconsistencies of the text as simple inattention. The text remains whole and intact, and any interpretation must consequently take it all into account.

### Further Constructions

You may marry or murder or do what you like with him.  
(Doyle *Memories* 87)

The Great Game, it might be objected, is not a *bona fide* set of readings. Rather, it is a performance of the act of reading, conscious of its own constructedness. But precisely this stylised Game allows us to observe the internal contradiction in the author figure; the sanctioning function that enables the confidence in the end, on which the reader's progress through the text depends, and whose implicit promise of meaning allows us to revise and discard provisional readings instead of rejecting sections of text will often appear conflated with the biographical figure whose life is seen as the primary catalyst of the creation of the text. The sanctioning function is founded in, but also limited by, the biographical figure of the author. The tension between the two becomes apparent in the complete absence of Arthur Conan Doyle's other writings from the considerations of Holmesians, but also through the Holmesian fiction of the Literary Agent: the removal of the biographical author has the effect of strengthening the sanctioning function, perhaps because one can no longer dismiss inconsistencies through a reference to an imperfectly executed authorial intention. Any error which cannot otherwise be explained must be attributed to the parallel fiction of Dr Watson as author, leaving the sanctioned text untouched. By discarding the biographical author, and retaining only the sanctioning authority, the Game also removes the authorial claim to interpretative authority, thereby simultaneously closing off the mutability of the text and opening it up to a multitude of readings, resolving the apparent paradox that resistance to authorial

control over the text involves a strengthened reliance on the sanctioning authorial authority.

It is probably not an accident that this conscious separation develops in the reception of the Holmes stories, and gains traction in the aftermath of Golden Age detective fiction. The formal detective story trained a reading community that was willing to follow the authorial text in the confidence that the twists and turns would lead towards an end which would illuminate the text that had been read and separate the false clues from the true, but also a reading community that was encouraged to look beyond apparent plots towards the surprising truth in the end which would upend them. This cultivated the very combination of coherence-making and eye for contradiction which forms the backbone of the Great Game.

In the first section of this article, I painted the picture of a docile reader following the progression of the text, anticipating the revelation at the end in the confidence that the text had been plotted. Even my subsequent discussions have dealt with those who, while contrary in their reading, rely all the more on their submission to the text as they encounter it in order to construct their theories in the gaps available to them. However, the strong emphasis on the authority of the canon in Holmesian tradition, and the clear separation of canon and apocrypha, may have contributed to the acceptability of the apocryphal writings themselves. Holmesian pastiche (or fan fiction) is as old as the Game, and it has been met with a high level of tolerance.<sup>14</sup> In fact, Edgar W. Smith claimed that “there is no Sherlockian worthy of his salt who has not, at least once in his life, taken Dr. Watson's pen in hand”, considering it evidence “of our happily unrepressed desire to make ourselves at one with the Master of Baker Street and all his works – and to do this not only receptively, but creatively as well” (Smith “Introduction” 1). The strong delineation of the canon, then, opens the door to apocrypha without threatening authorial authority or the integrity of the canonical figures or stories, thereby making possible the proliferation of the figures of Holmes and Watson in all their extra-canonical variations. Out of this tradition a third category of readers arises – readers who do not discard their provisional readings when faced with a divergent authorial text, and who instead write alternative fictions not just in the gaps of the canon but in direct opposition to it.<sup>15</sup> The stylised performance of the Game, then, not only highlights the tensions within the author figure, it may also have laid the foundation for a new attitude to fan authorship.

## Works Cited

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<sup>14</sup> J. M. Barrie wrote a pastiche in which he himself and Arthur Conan Doyle meet the detective in “The Adventure of the Two Collaborators” (1924), reprinted in Doyle's *Memories and Adventures* (87-89).

<sup>15</sup> Sabine Vanacker gives an excellent analysis of how Sherlockian pastiche is used to break open both gender structures and the Anglocentrism of the canon in her “Sherlock's Progress through History”, drawing on Abigail Derecho's term “archontic fiction” (Derecho 64) to describe the development of fan writing around the Sherlock Holmes figure.

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