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Holmes's girls: genderbending and feminising the canon in *Elementary*

Abstract:

The CBS series *Elementary* extends and transforms the *Sherlock Holmes* canon by feminising major characters to engage interesting interpersonal dynamics with gender discourses. In *Elementary*, Sherlock Holmes is portrayed as a former consultant for Scotland Yard who moves to New York City after becoming addicted to heroin. At the opening of the series, Holmes escapes rehab and moves in with his new 'sober companion', Dr Watson, to begin working criminal cases for the NYPD. Both Dr Watson and Holmes's nemesis Moriarty are genderbent, following the popular fanfiction trope where male characters are reimagined into female characters in order to explore and critique the traditional gender expectations at work in the original (and, in this case, subsequent adaptations). This paper will examine the narrative effect of genderbending characters in *Elementary*, and argues that by feminizing supporting male characters, the narrative becomes a significantly richer engagement with gender normativity and representation in contemporary mainstream media.

Biographical note:

Jessica Seymour is an early-career researcher at Southern Cross University. Her research interests include children's and YA literature, transmedia storytelling, fan studies and popular culture. Last year, she co-edited *Fan Studies: Researching Popular Audiences*, and has contributed chapters to several essay collections, which ranged in topic from *Divergent*, to *Doctor Who*, to ecocriticism in the works of JRR Tolkien.

Keywords:

Sherlock Holmes – Arthur Conan Doyle – *Elementary* – adaptation – gender bending

Rule 63: 'For any given male character, there is a female version of that character' (Urban dictionary n.d.).

When CBS first announced the production of a new *Sherlock Holmes* adaption, *Elementary*, the series was met with much scepticism and bewilderment among critics and fans of Doyle's detective series. A modern adaptation was hardly new territory for the franchise; in fact, the producers of BBC's *Sherlock* immediately took to Twitter to voice their outrage at CBS for copying their premise (Coren 2012). The knowledge that the new series would be set in America, and would be structured as a police-procedural crime drama, was also deeply troubling to fans who wanted the Victorian nostalgia to remain in adaptations (Coren 2012). Many critics and fans were particularly troubled by the announcement that Dr. John Watson, Holmes's roommate and biographer, would become Dr. *Joan* Watson played by Lucy Liu.

Fanfiction has long been a site of innovation and writing back to originary texts (Tosenberger 2008), while traditional adaptations are haunted by their need to do 'justice' to the original work. Genderbending characters from mainstream media is a common practice among fans, particularly when the narratives in question have an unequal ratio of male to female characters. Fans of the *Sherlock* BBC series frequently apply Rule 63 (outlined above) to Sherlock, John and Moriarty, and there are several fan-run blogs which bring these works together in art and fiction, roleplaying and fan-made videos.¹ Genderbending critiques or actively subverts gender expectations and normativity by exposing the constructions of traditional gender roles and then imposing a new gender identity onto characters which embody them. By changing the gender of characters, most often from male to female, fans extend and include aspects of social justice and gender politics which are often overlooked in the mainstream.

There was some concern among critics when the series was first announced that this change would turn the series into a *When Harry Met Sally*-esque situation (Coren 2012; Gregory 2013). It was feared that Watson's new gender would introduce a romantic, 'will they/won't they' aspect to the relationship between Holmes and Watson. More importantly, there were fears that Watson would become the follower, admirer and helper of the male lead, instead of an active female character in her own right. While it is questionable whether the original texts included references to a potential *homosexual* relationship between Holmes and Watson (DeMarco 2011), or whether adaptations with both leads as male characters include homoerotic subtext (Lavigne 2012; Basu 2012; Thomas 2012), the assumption that Watson would become a love interest by virtue of her gender indicates that the heteronormative expectation of romantic love between a man and women was paramount to the suppositions of critics regardless of how the relationship between male characters is portrayed. The scriptwriters in *Elementary*, along with the costume designers and actors, have developed their narrative with the awareness that these characters are expected – by virtue of their gender – to become romantically involved. As I will argue, the script writers then provide dialogue to the actors to make the platonic nature of their pairing explicit for the audience.

At the end of Season 2, after Holmes has trained Watson in his methods and leaves her to fend for herself in New York, she establishes her own detective practice and thrives throughout Season 3. She and Sherlock still work together, but Watson keeps a separate practice and personal life while Sherlock trains his latest protégé Kitty Winter. Kitty Winter's original incarnation in Doyle's (1924) 'The Adventure of the Illustrious Client' casts her as the consensual mistress of a man who collects women; in the *Elementary* series, Kitty Winter's sexual autonomy is erased because she is presented as a rape victim. Kitty's characterisation and gender performance is troubling as it is based almost entirely in her past as a victim of sexual assault but this paper is focused on how genderbending affects gender performance in *Elementary*, and so Kitty Winter is beyond the scope of this paper. The difference between the representation of ordinary adapted characters and genderbent adapted characters certainly deserves critical attention, but is beyond the scope of this paper.

Elementary engages with the fan practice of genderbending by changing the genders of both John Watson and James Moriarty. While genderbending is usually reserved for the realm of fanfiction, and not legitimate adaptation, *Elementary* employs the device by changing John into Joan. As Carlen Lavigne (2012) notes in his examination of sexuality in the BBC's *Sherlock*, scriptwriters are aware of fan theories and practices when they are developing their scripts, and so will occasionally demonstrate an 'explicit awareness' (20) of the fans and their theories and expectations. This is demonstrated in the show's themes of rejecting female gender expectations and the development of Watson into a detective independent of her partnership with Holmes.

Debra Beattie (2013) writes that scripts can represent a 'deliberately selfreflective act' (2) by innovating and critiquing through performance, thereby 'moving towards a state of uncovering what had been hidden' (2). *Elementary* is selfreflective in performing alternative genders in narrative spaces traditionally occupied by men in order to demonstrate that it is a) a useful and successful approach to adaptation beyond the expectations of the canon text, and b) that it can be done without presenting the female characters in a harmful or toxic way. It combines the nostalgic expectations of a traditional, classic series with the modern-day expectations of gender and social justice. This is significant because it demonstrates the progressive strategies of genderbending in the context of contemporary adaptation. By genderbending Watson and Moriarty, *Elementary* critiques the traditional gender expectations portrayed in previous (and contemporary) adaptations of *Sherlock Holmes*. The series demonstrates a more open and inclusive ideal of female gender expectations by portraying women in these crucial supporting roles.

Glorified helper monkey

Dr. Joan Watson is introduced in *Elementary* as a nurturing figure. A former surgeon, Watson is currently engaged as a 'sober companion' to keep Holmes from relapsing into drug addiction. The nurturing relationship between the two occupations is demonstrated during dialogue with Watson's friends during 'Déjà Vu All Over Again' (1.18): 'I think it's incredible what you're doing. You walk away from being a doctor,

found a new way to help people. Same old Joan'. This dialogue indicates that Watson's character values the ability to help others and is well-known for it among her peers. This could arguably be seen as a conservative reaction to Watson's femaleness, as nurturing and caring are traditionally associated with the female gender (Gilligan 1982; Noddings 1998; Noddings 2012). She performs the role of female guardian and nurturer, as opposed to the hyper-masculine, action-oriented male Watsons in BBC's *Sherlock* and Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes* films. As Moriarty, played by Natalie Dormer, explains, Watson is a 'professional angel to perch on [Holmes's] shoulder, fend off his many demons' ('Heroine' 1.24). Watson shares his living space, attends NA meetings with him, and guides him from through the various potential relapse triggers he encounters in his day-to-day life.

Her position as nurturer within the narrative is further supported by her concern for child victims and their families ('Child Predator' 1.3), her offers of emotional support to the families of murder victims ('Dirty Laundry' 1.11), and her continued desire to connect emotionally with Holmes ('Flight Risk' 1.6; 'One Way To Get Off' 1.7). She is a caring figure, and her embodiment of this trope includes frequently extending care to virtual strangers. Despite Watson's background in medicine, she is portrayed as slightly squeamish at crime scenes ('While You Were Sleeping' 1.2), and she becomes flustered during the 'Pilot' (1.1) when Holmes pretends to have fallen in love with her at first sight. The character is also shown to be conscious of her appearance around attractive men ('Rat Race' 1.4) and her costumes frequently include skirts, heeled shoes and feminine hats. Her gender performance is rampant with 'traditional' female characteristics.

While Watson's performance is distinctly female, I would argue that this serves to further demonstrate the innovative nature of genderbending and contributes to the overall discourse of gender subversion in the series. Watson is not portrayed as a male character which has been superficially switched to a female one – which in itself would be highly problematic as it would privilege masculine behaviours, rather than critically interrogate the stereotypes – rather, she is a female character who occupies the narrative space traditionally reserved in adaptations for a male character.

Her status in the narrative as a carer for Holmes, a 'professional angel', indicates her occupation of gender roles which are traditionally associated with womanhood and femininity (Gilligan 1982; Noddings 1998; Noddings 2012). However, her occupation of these roles does not in any way limit her usefulness in the narrative. On the contrary, Watson's background in medicine is compounded by her ability to empathise with victims, allowing her to see connections and possibilities which Holmes misses ('Pilot' 1.1; 'Lesser Evils' 1.5; *The Leviathan* 1.10). By adapting Holmes into a modern-day drug addict, Watson's position as drug counsellor is portrayed as crucial to his ability to work; not only because she prevents him from doing heroin, but her training as a counsellor allows her to adapt herself to Holmes's many mood swings ('Child Predator' 1.3), effectively rendering her the perfect assistant to the detective.

It is clear during *Elementary* that Holmes admires Watson's resourcefulness and intelligence, but while the admiration is mutual she still plans to terminate the

relationship despite her reluctance to leave. His desire for her to remain with him after her six-week contract demonstrates that he gets as much out of the relationship as Watson does. More so, arguably, since he is the one who initiates their partnership. Initially, Holmes offers Watson a role as his apprentice-cum-housekeeper ('Dirty Laundry' 1.11) in an attempt to preserve their employer/employee relationship. When but when this fails to elicit any enthusiasm in Watson, Holmes amends the offer to include an assumption of equality (1.16).

There is an implication here that, rather than supporting his achievements, Watson will be expected to contribute to the partnership with her own ideas and analyses. Rather than being portrayed as a female foil to the male lead, or even a male foil in the manner of the BBC and Ritchie versions, Watson subverts the expectation of critics that the adaptation would render Watson a passive observer to Holmes's brilliance.

You're just some woman with a crazy story

Once Watson and Holmes begin their partnership, Watson's development as a consulting detective begins to represent the bulk of her character arc over the series. While Moriarty disparagingly calls Watson 'a kind of mascot' ('Heroine' 1.24), the relationship Watson and Holmes share is one of mutual support and admiration. Holmes calls Watson 'exceptional' ('On The Line' 2.9), and praises her attempts to mimic his crime-solving style. When Holmes and Watson are forced to work with Greg Lestrade, Holmes's former partner from Scotland Yard, Holmes compares Lestrade's deductive talents unfavourably to Watson's: 'You spend your time resenting my abilities; she spends her time developing her own' ('The One Percent Solution' 2.16). To Holmes, Watson is particularly praiseworthy because she is a skilled detective dedicated to perfecting the craft.

Holmes often uses the Socratic method in training Watson by putting her on the spot at crime scenes to test her comprehension. When Watson gets it wrong, he explains what she missed; when she gets it right he responds with a simple 'Kudos, Watson. Adequately done' ('Possibility Two' 1.17). Despite this apparently cold response, Holmes is shown to trust Watson's abilities to improvise and learn as she goes. This is demonstrated in 'Step Nine' (2.1) when he tells a suspect that Watson is an expert in home security so that they can get a good look at his home. Despite her being unprepared for this deceit, she succeeds in maintaining the ruse. Later, in 'We Are Everyone' (2.3), Holmes makes a throw-away remark to teaching her pickpocketing and Watson, rather than waiting for him to instruct her, looks into it on her own. Her new skill allows her to steal a suspect's watch and use the DNA in the wristband to prove that he is a killer. While the Watsons in other adaptations are extremely competent, Watson's femaleness is what made critics assume that she would not be so; so by repeatedly demonstrating her ability to surpass Holmes's expectations, the script writers demonstrate Watson's ability to destabilize the expectations of viewers.

Holmes allows Watson to take point in the conclusion of the cases. One of the most important conventions of the crime drama genre is the 'big reveal' where the detective explains who the killer is and how they came to that conclusion (Laurence 2007).

Despite Holmes technically being the main investigator in most of their cases, Watson is often seen delivering the big reveal in episodes such as 'Déjà Vu All Over Again' (1.18), 'Solve for X' (2.2), and 'Blood Is Thicker' (2.8). He is also shown subtly guiding her towards potential cases and praising her ability to recognise and solve them without his guidance ('Possibility Two' 1.17). Once Watson becomes established as a consulting detective, she is offered work by both the NYPD and private clients. While she provides support for his deductive practices, her character remains useful and talented beyond her ability to assist Holmes.

During 'An Unnatural Arrangement' (2.6), an NYPD detective approaches Watson at the coffee machine and asks her to look into the case without Holmes because Holmes is unpleasant to work with: 'I said "hi" to that guy once, and he said that I interrupted his train of thought. He called me a "bellend"'.² Holmes's penchant for alienating his colleagues juxtaposes with Watson's friendlier, feminized approach to relationships as demonstrated repeatedly throughout the series. It also categorizes Watson's approach as being the most desirable. Watson is shown independently investigating a dry-cleaner which is actually a front for Russian money-launderers ('Possibility Two' 1.17), her friend's elusive one-night stand ('Ancient History' 2.5), and the abduction of a homeless veteran ('Corps de Ballet' 2.15). Eventually, Watson is given permission by Holmes to reopen his cold cases and attempt to solve them herself ('An Unnatural Arrangement' 2.6; 'Dead Clade Walking' 2.14). This demonstrates not only her talent for crime-solving, but also her continued ability to work apart from Holmes and establish herself as an entity separate and whole from the relationship.

Many male characters in the series do not share Holmes's admiration of Watson. Criminals and police officers alike disparage Watson's gender, assuming that she's a hysterical woman making things up as she goes along ('Déjà Vu All Over Again' 1.18; 'Corpse de Ballet' 2.15), and these men are always portrayed negatively. When Holmes makes a throw-away remark to menstruation, Watson rebukes him immediately: 'Couching it as a scientific observation totally negates the misogyny' (1.15). There is a similar interaction between Watson and Captain Gregson later in the season, when Gregson tries to send Watson to Hawaii because he fears that she will be endangered by Holmes's work:

Watson: You're in the danger zone also.

Gregson: I've been a cop for 30 years, I carry a gun.

Watson: And a penis.

'Risk Management' (1.22).

Given the fact that this series is set in modern-day America, which unfortunately remains rife with casual sexism, it is unsurprising that Watson is often the victim of misogyny even at the hands of those men who are ostensibly supportive of her. But it is important to recognise that, by using Watson's gender to initiate a dialogue which acknowledges sexism as well as portraying it negatively, the script writers engage with contemporary social justice discourses which would otherwise be unavailable to the series if Watson were a man.

In Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes* (2009), Watson has difficulty leaving Holmes's 'orbit' despite his portrayed desire to enjoy a quiet, married life with Mary Morstan. In the

film series, Watson is repeatedly pulled back into the crime-fighting life by Holmes, losing Mary's engagement ring during one fight sequence. *Elementary's* female Watson is significantly more concerned with personal boundaries, and makes a serious effort to distance herself from Holmes when she feels herself becoming more and more dependent on him. When Holmes attempts to convince her that their work should exceed all other concerns, Watson replies: 'No, *you* are what you do. You have to be to be happy. I don't' ('Art In The Blood' 2.23). Watson is represented as establishing boundaries and then sticking to them, making her a particularly engaging adaptation of the character by virtue of her ability to withdraw from Holmes when she realises that her personal boundaries are being threatened. These boundaries carry through to Season 3 when, despite her desire to lose herself in her work following the death of her boyfriend, Andrew ('Hemlock' 3.13), she still creates a separate space for herself in Holmes's home ('When Your Number's Up' 3.15).

By genderbending Watson, *Elementary* creates a character who subverts the expectations of the adaptation by being portrayed as desiring a life and career outside of her relationship with Holmes. Unlike other adaptations, *Elementary* critiques the traditional expectations of the pair as being ultimately co-dependant; Watson, as a female character with a background in addiction counselling and mentoring people through the transition from rehab to real-life, recognises the dangers of co-dependant relationships and chooses to remove herself from the situation rather than risk losing herself to Holmes. Despite the expectations of critics of the series, Watson refuses to be defined by her relationship to Holmes and his work. She is her own woman, not Holmes's 'mascot'.

As if men had a monopoly on murder

Both BBC's *Sherlock* and Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes* use the character of Irene Adler as a romantic interest for Holmes. Adler, who appeared in only one short story in Doyle's canon, is frequently employed in adaptations of the series as a method of establishing Holmes's heterosexuality and introducing a romantic subplot (Thomas 2012; stavvers 2012). She is often employed as a femme fatale prop to facilitate the narrative's drama; but she is rarely afforded the kind of agency which Doyle afforded her. In fact, Esther Inglis-Arkel's (2013) analysis of recent adaptations of Adler argues that 'they actually seem more old-fashioned than Doyle's 19th Century original' (para. 1). Both the BBC and Ritchie versions undress on camera in order to rattle Holmes and demonstrate her sexual power over him. They are later shown to have been under the power of Moriarty for the majority of the narrative. Neither of these versions do justice to the original, because neither is allowed to be a brilliant woman in her own right. She is guided or abused by Moriarty, before being rescued by Holmes or murdered.

Initially, it appears that *Elementary* follows this trend by portraying Irene Adler as Holmes's dead lover. Her murder before the events of the series acts as a catalyst for Holmes's decline. The act of killing off a female character in order to extend a male character's emotional development is commonly known as 'fridging', in honour of Alexandra DeWitt, girlfriend of the Green Lantern, who is murdered by Major Force

and literally stuffed into a fridge for him to find (Simone 1999). Unfortunately, fridging women is typical of the police procedural crime genre, with clear examples in shows such as *Criminal Minds* (2005), *NCIS* (2003), and *The Mentalist* (2008). There are also examples of fridged women being used to facilitate female character arcs, such as Kate Beckett's deceased mother in *Castle* (2009).

Elementary initially follows this trope by indicating in the 'Pilot' (1.1) that Sherlock's descent into drug-use was triggered by a woman. Watson's remarkable detective skills eventually uncover the truth: that Holmes fell in love with a woman named Irene Adler, and that she was murdered in London by a serial killer named Moriarty. Adler is idealised by Holmes – who calls her 'The Woman' ('Risk Management' 1.22) – and is only mentioned during the series when Holmes is rationalizing his desire for murderous vengeance or explaining how his addiction was triggered. Adler, then, is the quintessential fridged female character. Her character is limited to how her apparent death affects Holmes; at least until the series subverts the expectations of the fridged woman trope by dramatically revealing that Adler and Moriarty are the same woman.

Elementary's Moriarty employs the same disguise as Doyle's original Adler; she assumes the persona of a man. In 'A Scandal in Bohemia' (Doyle 1892a), Irene Adler is shown to be independently brilliant, capable of seeing through Holmes's ruse and manipulating him in her own way before disappearing with the man she had fallen in love with. Importantly, Doyle's Adler does not need to undress to deceive Holmes – she cross-dresses. She assumes the male gender to follow Holmes and determine who he is and why he is investigating her. By employing a male lieutenant to contact Holmes and Watson, *Elementary*'s Moriarty is depicted as playing on the assumption of masculinity afforded to villains in the crime drama genre.

Moriarty, paradoxically, expresses similar gender assumptions and discrimination as many male characters in her dealings with Watson. As discussed above, Moriarty calls Watson a 'mascot' and a 'professional angel' in an attempt to undermine her during the two-part finale of season one ('Heroine' 1:24). During 'The Diabolical Kind' (2:12), Moriarty explains that she'd assumed that Watson pursued a partnership with Holmes because she is enamoured with him and wants to impress him. I would argue that Moriarty has internalised the patriarchal expectations of gender identity in the Western world. While Moriarty is arrogant – telling Holmes that she is better than him, and that he is a game she will win every time – she acknowledges that a potential client might 'struggle' with her gender ('Heroine' 1.24) and takes steps to hide it. This recognition of her own position in the patriarchal structure of criminal proceedings is further compounded by her decision to employ only men (at least, all of the members of Moriarty's organisation which the viewer sees are male). She takes Watson to lunch to intimidate and belittle her, and although Moriarty tells Watson that 'women can be a little more difficult to read' than men ('Heroine' 1.24), she continues to assume that Watson is pursuing a sexual relationship with Holmes, rather than a genuine partnership.

I would argue that Moriarty considers herself to be the exception to rule; she subscribes to the patriarchal assumption that women are, for the most part, romantic

and sentimental, but remains sure that she is above such things. Moriarty is duly shocked when she learns that it was Holmes, not Watson, who initiated their partnership. Genderbending Moriarty and portraying her as having internalised some level of misogyny indicates an engagement on the part of the script writers with traditional gender normativity and expectations, as well as a recognition that it is not only men who sometimes fall for gender normativity. Moriarty misjudges Watson's motivations and abilities, and this fatal mistake lands Moriarty in prison. Although she is portrayed as being confident that she will be released eventually, she is horrified by her mistake: '... you're more clever than I initially estimated. More interesting. If you weren't I would never have been caught' ('The Diabolical Kind' 2.12). The portrayal of internalised misogyny as Moriarty's fatal flaw – as opposed to her arrogance, her desire for Holmes, or the complexity of her plans – is telling for a television series which is so concerned with social justice and minority representation.

All's well that ends well, right?

At the conclusion of the second series, Watson decides to move out of Holmes's brownstone and find accommodation of her own ('The Grand Experiment' 2.24). Holmes's reaction to this undertaking is telling;

Holmes: Not angry, I'm disappointed. You're still unformed as a detective.

Watson: I told you, I don't want to stop working with you.

Holmes: You just want to do it on your own terms, is that it?

Watson: I am not the one with terms, Ok. You're, like, made of them. You have been from the beginning.

'The Grand Experiment' (2.24).

Here, Watson makes a clear and powerful distinction between her desire to live on her own and her desire to work with Holmes; to her, they are not mutually exclusive. For Holmes, however, the idea that Watson would be living a life beyond him is so troubling that his reaction demonizes Watson and casts her as a villain for wanting to introduce her own terms to their relationship. This negative portrayal of Holmes as violently opposing Watson's desire for agency does not impede Watson's desire to move out; in fact, the series concludes with her on the phone to a prospective landlord.

While Watson becomes Holmes's protégé and partner, the script writers use the character to recognise and rebuke various examples of misogyny in the male characters which surround her. She provides emotional stability as well as practical support, using her past as a surgeon to assist Holmes with his work. Moriarty is originally presented to the audience as Holmes's fridged lover Irene Adler, but she is unmasked as Moriarty during the finale of season one. Moriarty's character actively dismisses the narrative expectations of masculinity in the antagonist of a *Sherlock Holmes* adaptation. She is legitimately Holmes's superior; both intellectually and strategically. It is Watson who, with her emotional intelligence and deductive ability, eventually uses Moriarty's expectations of a female character to defeat her.

The women of *Elementary* personify and reject the gender normativity of other adaptations of Doyle's original series. These genderbent characters explicitly acknowledge and reject gender stereotypes and in doing this they offer a unique and progressive take on both the original series, and the recent adaptations which appear to tacitly subscribe to Victorian values. By implementing fan practices which challenge the status quo of the traditional series and its adaptations, *Elementary* offers a significantly richer portrayal of female characters in a male-dominated narrative. The take-away from this is that script writers need not allow the source material to haunt their adaptations of classic works to the modern age to the point where they stymie innovation. The world is changing, and characters like Holmes and Watson continue to resonate – but that does not mean that the stories and the values within them can't change and grow.

Endnotes:

¹ For art and fiction, see davidburked.tumblr n.d.. For roleplaying, see askfemlock.tumblr n.d., and for fan-made videos, see sherlockgenderswap.tumblr n.d. and sherlockcharacteranalysis.tumblr n.d..

² Bellend: British slang for the head of a penis

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- 'Blood Is Thicker' 2013 Series 2, episode 8, CBS, 14 November.
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