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Writing the First World War at Home: Exploring Gender Representations in Selected Short Stories of Sherlock Holmes and Max Carrados

Stephanie Sumner, Universität Potsdam  [0009-0007-5053-8852](https://orcid.org/0009-0007-5053-8852)

Abstract

The First World War with all its unimaginable horrors had an unprecedented impact on British society. Both at home and abroad, during and after the war, (gender) roles had to be redefined, renegotiated, and rediscovered. The negotiation of these changing and often conflicting gender expectations happened quietly, subtly, and away from the public eye to keep the ‘stiff upper lip’ the British were so famous for. Nevertheless, popular literature such as detective fiction – which is already walking the tightrope between what is right and what is wrong, what is normative and what is deviant – gave these negotiations room and agency, if only at a second, deeper glance.

In this chapter, two short stories, “His Last Bow” (1917) by Arthur Conan Doyle and “The Secret of Headlam Height” (1925) by Ernest Bramah, are examined with regard to these negotiations and how they could be represented to the readership. The focus here lies particularly on the sidekick characters, an aspect of detective fiction largely neglected in scholarly research so far, and the two female aides in the stories. The characters of John Watson and Parkinson, as well as housekeeper Martha and “professional lady cryptologer” Clifton Baker, manage to show through their actions and absences, as well as their words and silences, the multi-faceted and contradictory gender identities and expectations which resulted from the societal discourse at the time, and provided members of both sexes with extraordinary challenges in these tumultuous times. In particular, the sidekick character showcases these contradictions and how they were dealt with in a fascinating way – despite the predefined role(s) and audience expectations, it needed to adhere to while also having to fit the mould the generic conventions had shaped for it.

Keywords

Sidekick, Max Carrados, Sherlock Holmes, masculinity, First World War

Crime as a social construct inhabits a liminal position. Like gender, it crosses boundaries and is thus positioned on a perpetual threshold between what is read as “order” or “normality” and “chaos” or “deviance”. Crime Fiction provides the space to investigate this liminality and to open up stereotypical concepts of normativity in crime, gender and sexuality. (Mün-derlein, “Call for Papers”)

Arthur Conan Doyle's "His Last Bow" (1917) and Ernest Bramah's "The Secret of Headlam Height" (1925) are situated at several thresholds, both historical and literary. They are, thus, excellent examples to explore a variety of ways in which crime fiction can represent this liminality, this 'hanging in limbo' between 'order/normality' and 'chaos/deviance', and gender representations are just one of many aspects worthy of further investigation when discussing the two short stories in question.

Of course, Sherlock Holmes and the vast variety of works he has appeared in has been the topic of many a discussion already, but his contemporary Max Carrados, the blind supersleuth created by Ernest Bramah, has largely been omitted from scholarly research. Published between 1914 and 1934 in *The Strand Magazine*, Carrados was once considered to be one of Holmes' most notable competitors,¹ and he and his sidekicks Parkinson and Mr Carlyle offer a great insight into the ideological possibilities of detective fiction, which go beyond a discussion of both the detective's abilities and blindness.

Set in the last days of July 1914, both stories give the reader a glimpse of Britain on the precipice of war with Germany, capturing the calm before the storm with a nation collectively holding its breath. Meanwhile, unbeknownst to almost everyone, the famous detectives (and their sidekicks) are saving the nation from yet another threat. This first divergence from what was traditionally expected from classical serialised detective fiction, namely that it deals with "family irregularities and the consequences of selfishness, rather than dangers endemic to the system" (Kayman 49) invites the question in how far these stories deviate from the norm in other ways, and how the reality of being situated at a variety of thresholds may inform or cause this deviance. Looking at the range of characters in particular, a threshold of a more ideological nature in terms of the representation of unstable gender roles and changing societal expectations becomes obvious. Here one may ask in how far contemporary ideas and discourses regarding male and female identities and roles, their behaviour, and their agency were mirrored in popular literature, and subsequently, how this liminality is translated into detective stories. Lastly, the two stories find themselves on a literary threshold concerning the genre of crime/detective fiction as well. Published shortly before ("His Last Bow",² 1917) and shortly after ("The Secret of Headlam Height", 1925) Agatha Christie's *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), a book often hailed as the first novel of British Golden Age crime fiction, Holmes and Carrados find themselves at the literary thresholds from detective fiction with firmly Victorian roots and celebrating remnants of a time gone by to

¹ Bramah's stories frequently outsold Doyle's (Bramah, "Complete Works" 1127).

² Hereafter: "HLB"

Golden Age fiction with its country houses and (upper) middle-class concerns, and simultaneously, from short story to novel.³

The question then arises, how may the historical reality of the First World War that is at the centre of the plot influence the representation of gender here despite the difference in publication date? And additionally, how can these aforementioned thresholds be understood and interpreted in terms of the prevailing hegemonic ideologies at the time? Pierre Macherey and Etienne Balibar argue that

[i]t is important to “locate” the production of literary effects historically as part of the ensemble of social practices. . . . Literature and history are not each set up externally to each other . . . but are in an intricate and connected relationship. . . . Very generally, this internal relationship is what constitutes the definition of literature as an ideological form. (6)

William Stowe makes a similar argument by emphasising that “popular art . . . is a vehicle by which a society teaches and perpetuates its values” (590). Simultaneously, Terry Eagleton reminds one that “ideology is not consistent or coherent in itself . . . – rather it conflicts with and contradicts itself. It is built out of fragments of discourse that, precisely because they are misrepresentations of reality, fail to constitute a single, homogeneous account of that reality” (qtd. in Ferreter 132).

Nevertheless, it may be worth remembering that it does not fall to writers to “manufacture ideologies” as they are “formed independently of [them]” (Macherey qtd. in Porter 128), but to make “ideologies visible and they achieve this through the very activity of writing them into the forms of their fiction” (Porter 128). It should, therefore, not be surprising to find this variety of historical, ideological, and literary thresholds represented in detective fiction at this particular point in time, with some more nuanced than others, some on the verge to being crossed, while others may disintegrate again and, thus, become obsolete. How this impacts the represented ideas and expectations towards gender will be explored in the following.

To explore the ‘making visible’ of ideologies within the two short stories, especially regarding gender roles and (normative) gender representations, this chapter will investigate more closely the various characters and relationships, first and foremost the sidekicks and female aides. The sidekick is of particular interest here, not only

³ This shift is referring here to the ongoing popularity of serialised (British) detective fiction, which regularly appeared in magazines such as *The Strand Magazine*, and the subsequent shift to longer detective novels with the onset of the Golden Age. While the short story allowed for a series of self-enclosed cases with a range of familiar, recurring characters to be regularly published in popular (middle-class) magazines also containing several other “texts dealing with history and biography, travel and adventure, and information on contemporary society and public affairs” (Kayman 41), the much longer ‘clue-puzzle’ of the Golden Age allowed some of the newer generic conventions such as the multiplicity of suspects the required space, which simultaneously made the cases more complex. This change can further be discussed in the context of other Golden Age developments regarding the form and genre, but this has been done in a number of publications already. An introductory text to the subject is “The golden age” by Stephen Knight, published in Martin Priestman’s (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction* (2003).

because of the overall lack of scholarly research on the topic so far.⁴ He also lends himself to the exploration of stereotypical representations and normative patterns in terms of gender (roles) while taking into consideration the narratological function he is meant to fulfil and respond to. The female aides are of interest as they appear to differ greatly within both stories, and yet the question arises whether they really are that different or can simply be read as two sides of the same coin. An examination of the concepts of gender representation in classic British crime fiction on the threshold from ‘Victorian’ (in its widest sense) to Golden Age is thus inevitable. The figure of the detective has been consciously omitted here as it has already been discussed at length in a large number of other publications. The sidekick and supporting characters often get no attention at all and this chapter aims to change this.

Watson

John Watson is a character much-loved and well-known. Readers of the Sherlock Holmes stories will be familiar with the doctor’s chronicles of the famous detective’s adventures with his commentary on the action and other parties involved, and his (more or less) useful questions and additions to the overall processes of deduction and investigation. Concerning the sidekick’s narratological function, the stories, traditionally, follow a familiar formula, which can be found – sometimes with slight variations – in other works of detective fiction involving the sidekick character such as Agatha Christie’s Poirot novels. Usually, they begin with an ‘introduction by Watson / the sidekick’, followed by

- comments on the peculiarities of Holmes / the detective
- presentation of the mystery that is to be solved
- Holmes / the detective comes up with the solution without disclosing it, and Watson / the sidekick follows along, not always privy to his plan and thought process
- the culprits are confronted
- the mystery is solved
- Holmes / the detective provides the sidekick / reader / other characters with the solution, enjoying his moment in the spotlight.

“His Last Bow” does not play out according to these rules. Being one of only four Sherlock Holmes stories in the entire canon not narrated by Watson, the reader is deprived of the doctor’s entertaining interludes relating Holmes’s eccentric habits and extraordinary skills – aspects often embellished much to Holmes’s dismay. The reader is also deprived of the insights and the commentary of Watson, both relating to the crime and criminal, as well as to the witnesses, the police, and the deductive methods of Holmes. But why reduce the sidekick’s “complex and multifarious role

⁴ A notable exception here is the 2021 book *The Detective’s Companion in Crime Fiction* by Lucy Andrew and Samuel Saunders (eds.)

as the detective's loyal companion, protector and sounding board, as well as the narrator and intermediary between the detective and the reader" (Miranda 20-21) to one of "thickset chauffeur" ("HLB" 502), who seems entirely oblivious to the bigger threat at the (metaphorical and literal) doorstep of the British nation?

The reasons for the lack of Watson's voice in this particular story are manifold, with the most obvious being that Watson would have given Holmes's involvement and disguise away too early for the reader, thus eliminating the element of surprise. His lack of voice may also be symptomatic of the shift some have observed towards the end of the First World War in relation to the display of "militaristic and robust hypermasculinity, which found its apothecosis [sic] in the homosocial world of the boy's adventure story" (Francis 640), and which "in the aftermath of the mechanized slaughter of the 1914-1918 war . . . suffered a fatal blow" (640). As a consequence, one was able to observe "a reaction, a reassertion of the domesticated and private categories of masculinity" while "interwar boys' fiction, in contrast to late Victorian adventures, tested the manly resolve of its heroes in the familiar surroundings of the school or playing field, not in the wilds of Africa" (644). Obviously, detective fiction is not strictly speaking a 'boy's adventure story' nor 'interwar boys' fiction'. Nevertheless, it shares certain elements with adventure stories, for example, its formulaic nature as well as the extraordinary "hero – individual or group – overcoming obstacles and dangers and accomplishing some important and moral mission" (Cawelti 39), among others, which may allow for this connection to be made here. The shift from foreign settings to familiar ground and the closely linked "reassertion of the domestic . . . categories of masculinity" (Francis 644) would explain the lack of Watson's admiring interludes regarding Holmes's daring and intellectually superior exploits – he is less of a physical fighter than an intellectual one, although he is fond of boxing⁵ –, as well as the fact that rather than defeating a foreign spy on European soil, they managed to defeat him on home turf, and therefore brought the adventure 'home' at the same time. This is not to say that the shift from what John Tosh calls 'flight from domesticity' (*A Man's Place* 170) to the domesticated man was a sudden one if it has even been completed. Martin Francis recommends, instead,

replac[ing] the simplistic narrative of a "flight from domesticity" between 1870 and 1914, followed by a "re-domestication" of the male in the interwar years, with an awareness that men were continually seeking to reconcile and integrate the contradictory impulses of domestic responsibility and escapism, both of which could, at various times, find sanction in the polyphonic voices of popular culture or politics. (643)

⁵ In "The Yellow Face", Watson mentions that "Sherlock Holmes was a man who seldom took exercise for exercise's sake. Few men were capable of greater muscular effort, and he was undoubtedly one of the finest boxers of his weight that I have ever seen; but he looked upon aimless bodily exertion as a waste of energy, and he seldom bestirred himself save when there was some professional object to be served" (547). Nevertheless, Holmes is generally presented as someone interested in intellectual sparring with his opponents rather than physical altercations.

I argue that “His Last Bow” is such a polyphonic voice attempting the reconciliation of sparring societal expectations towards the Edwardian man at a time when Britain had been at war already much longer than originally anticipated. Simultaneously, it also strived to provide the sense of escapism that its (male) middle-class readership desired to experience. This may also be observed in the somewhat ambiguous or even contradictory persona of Watson, most obviously in his inability to retire from his adventures with Holmes (“HLB” 503). As a former army doctor and member of the “Berkshires, with whom [he] served at the fatal battle of Maiwand” (*A Study in Scarlet* 3) he is more than familiar with frontline experience. This in turn resulted in him both being injured and subsequently falling ill, thus ending his career in the British Army.

Simultaneously, though, he is frequently portrayed as being “unable to draw the proper inferences from his observations” (Miranda 31), which may be read as symptomatic of this ‘re-domestication’ already completed, albeit in a somewhat radical, even unbelievable way. He displays utter ignorance of the incoming threat of war at the end of “His Last Bow” in this final scene with Holmes:

“There’s an east wind coming, Watson.”

“I think not, Holmes. It is very warm.”

“Good old Watson! You are the one fixed point in a changing age. There’s an east wind coming all the same, such a wind as never blew on England yet. It will be cold and bitter, Watson, and a good many of us may wither before its blast. But it’s God’s own wind none the less, and a cleaner, better, stronger land will lie in the sunshine when the storm has cleared.” (507)

As a former army doctor embroiled in battle on the frontlines, it is unlikely he would be unable to draw quick (and, even more so, correct) conclusions from his surroundings, even at times of great stress and peril. Then why portray him as this “one fixed point in a changing age” (“HLB” 507), that is entirely incapable of grasping the severity of the situation, despite having just been involved in the capture of the German spy von Bork himself?

One explanation could be that he needed to fit the mould of what Ronald Knox described as “the stupid friend of the detective” (15) or the “admiring, thick-headed friend” (Sayers 13), as Dorothy L. Sayers wrote in her 1929 omnibus. This argumentation would fall in line with the convention that Watson is often positioned in contrast to the average reader in regards to intelligence and overall deductive abilities – a comparison he has to lose by default.⁶ The lack of his narration and, thus, his voice

⁶ Ronald Knox wrote further in his 1929 essay on *The Best English Detective Stories of 1928* that Watson . . . must not conceal any thoughts which pass through his mind; his intelligence must be slightly, but very slightly, below that of the average reader. . . . [I]f he does exist, he exists for the purpose of letting the reader have a sparring partner, as it were, against

in “His Last Bow” would, therefore, symbolise the inability of the ‘average man’ to comprehend and ‘narrate’ these (political) realities of war, echoed in the final inability to grasp the severity of the incoming threat. Yet, at the same time, as the representative of the common man (compared to the eccentric detective with extraordinary abilities and knowledge in a variety of areas), he is, nevertheless, there until the very end, ready or at least expected to face the horrors of the upcoming years, and carrying the ‘burden’ of such large political events on his very human and fragile shoulders, similarly to the (young) soldiers fighting and dying on the European battlefields.⁷ Holmes emphasises this inevitable human sacrifice when he says that “a good many of us may wither before its [the East Wind’s] blast” (“HLB” 507). Another explanation for Watson’s contradictory portrayal could be that he is, in fact, more than a narratological device, more than a “companion”, “narrator”, and “intermediary” (Miranda 20-21). Rather, he is the “ideology made visible”, to return to Porter’s claim, because of his inability to be a reliable narrator, competent army doctor, ‘adventurer’, as well as functioning, re-integrated, ‘domesticated’ member of society – his role as husband let alone father are rarely to never mentioned in the overall Holmes canon – is an expression of the struggle Francis talked about when he discussed the “complexity of Edwardian masculine sensibilities” (643).

Watson’s lack of voice in this particular short story has another effect, one that helps to promote an aspect that the sidekick would be unable to emphasise as strongly even if he was narrating the story. By taking away the narration and commentary of Watson, Conan Doyle substitutes another, more hostile voice in its stead. Throughout the earlier scenes of the story, the ones prior to the revelation that the Irish-American Altamont is in fact Holmes in disguise, the reader gets an insight into the thoughts and opinions of the two Germans, von Herling and von Bork. The latter’s opinion on his host country of the last couple of years could be better indeed when he claims that “they are not very hard to deceive [and] a more docile, simple folk could not be imagined” (“HLB” 492). Von Herling is slightly more reserved in his dismissal of the British, nevertheless, he agrees with von Bork’s general assessment that the British are too slow, too preoccupied with other things to be able to react

whom he can pit his brains. “I may have been a fool,” he says to himself as he puts the book down, “but at least I wasn’t such a doddering fool as poor old Watson”. (15)

This stands in constant contradiction, however, with his experience as an Army doctor or member of the medical profession in general as well as a loyal and recurring companion of Holmes, through which he will see and experience a multitude of different scenarios and cases which should, in theory, further train his brain and make him more receptive for anything regarding crime, danger, etc. This contradiction is never fully explained and may be a reason why the sidekick has been omitted from research for so long.

⁷ At the time of publication, the battle with the largest loss of life for British troops up to that point – the Battle of the Somme – had just witnessed its first anniversary, which may be one of the reasons the short story’s full title originally read “His Last Bow: The War Service of Sherlock Holmes”, and was later changed to “His Last Bow: An Epilogue of Sherlock Holmes”.

appropriately to the German threat of war.⁸ While this concession of agency for the German enemy seems counter-intuitive at first, in regards to the overall plot and particularly the element of surprise, it makes absolute sense. By distracting and potentially enraging the (British) readership with remarks such as those, while simultaneously not providing the explanatory commentary of Watson's narration, the story allows the final revelation of Holmes as Altamont, Watson as chauffeur, and Martha as an accomplice of the famous detective to be even more powerful, patriotic even. And yet, even this patriotism, which found its expression in what Tosh describes as "patriotic militarism in August 1914" ("Masculinities" 342), needs to be negotiated in a much more careful tone already by 1917. Holmes's statements both in the final scene and shortly before, when he warns von Bork that "the Englishman is a patient creature but at present his temper is a little inflamed" ("HLB" 507) reminds one less of "patriotic militarism" than of the 'stiff upper lip' attitude commonly associated with the British.

Parkinson

Parkinson as a sidekick differs from Watson, who is generally considered the archetypical sidekick, in a variety of ways. First of all, he does not narrate "The Secret of Headlam Height" nor any other Max Carrados story. The narration is instead done by a third-person narrator who is not involved in the action directly. Secondly, he also inhabits a very different position to Watson, which is a clear marker of class difference between him and the detective. Obviously, it is the upper-/middle-class eccentric detective with his financial independence, above-average deductive abilities, and specialised knowledge of all things crime and criminal who takes centre-stage in these stories. The sidekick, meanwhile, is required to be on a more or less equal (class) footing with the (middle-class) readership in order to emphasise the credibility of himself as narrator and/or mediator. Watson is a doctor and former member of the Army, for instance. Other sidekicks, such as Arthur Hastings, Mr Brett, or Nigel Bathgate are either also (former) Army personnel (Hastings), or journalists with more or less enough financial means to allow them the luxury and pleasure of accompanying their respective detectives on various exploits and adventures (Brett and Bathgate). Parkinson, however, is Max Carrados's personal attendant, which changes the relationship and interdependence between these two (and between the reader and the sidekick) significantly. In addition to the lack of (narratological) voice, which we already witnessed with Watson in "His Last Bow", albeit for

⁸ While pointing out that the British "have strange limits and one must learn to observe them" (HLB 492), he, nevertheless, concludes that "England is not ready. It is an inconceivable thing, but even our special war tax of fifty million, which one would think make our purpose as clear as if we had advertised it on the front page of the *Times*, has not roused these people from their slumber" (494).

different reasons, Parkinson's lack of voice in this and every other story is also expressed through his very employment with Carrados. As Carrados's attendant, and often also as his pair of eyes, he must come along and fulfil the role he is paid to do. That does not necessarily mean that he does not enjoy the thrill of the chase, or the new and often uncommon tasks that these adventures entail. Nevertheless, it highlights the very different circumstances this sidekick has been positioned in, namely a master-servant relationship.⁹ Admittedly, the Watson-Holmes relationship also features echoes of this type of relationship, but in terms of dependencies Watson is not reliant on Holmes's pay and employment, though he does appear to rely on the thrill of the chase Holmes enables him to enjoy more or less regularly.

Selina Todd writes in her article on "Domestic Service and Class Relations in Britain 1900-1950" that "servants lived by their labour; their social position was defined by it, their daily lives shaped by this reality" (188). This is true for Parkinson at least to some extent, although one should keep in mind that the way a servant's life was "shaped by this reality" differed greatly depending on the gender of the servant and the position he or she inhabited.¹⁰ As alluded to above, Parkinson's everyday life is defined by his role as an attendant. This role is never clearly defined for the reader, which allows for a certain ambiguity regarding his exact relationship with Carrados. References to Carrados as his 'master', however, allow one to make the necessary deductions regarding Parkinson's responsibilities and also the limitations which come with this 'servant reality'.

The presence of Parkinson as a personal attendant to Carrados also allows for the emphasis of an aspect previously discussed in the context of Watson in "His Last Bow". I am referring here to the "awareness that men were continually seeking to reconcile and integrate the contradictory impulses of domestic responsibility and escapism" (Francis 643). By including the persona of a domestic servant, Bramah avoids this need for "domestic responsibility" in the sense that a (male) servant's focus was primarily on their work and duties (both obviously in the context of the domestic) rather than on finding a wife and settling down themselves. Then again,

⁹ Lord Peter Wimsey's manservant Mervyn Bunter is a similar, if more defined and further developed character to Bramah's Parkinson. He enjoys more agency than Parkinson and appears more engaged within the progress of the plot, too. His position within a larger hierarchy of domestic staff adds to this extended agency, wherefore I am hesitant to treat these two pairings as equal. Bunter could rather be interpreted as an extended version of Parkinson, and a more in-depth study of the two may be worthwhile.

¹⁰ In her text, Todd focuses exclusively on the experience of the female domestic servant, which is interesting because she criticises "major historical studies of class in twentieth-century Britain" for the "silence on service" (Todd 181), yet she herself leaves an entire gender out of her discussion of domestic service and class. I am clearly not in a position here to rectify this, but, nevertheless, the reality of male domestic servants needs to be taken into consideration, particularly in this context.

the role of personal attendant to an amateur detective still allowed Parkinson to indulge in this ‘flight from domesticity’. This is mirrored in the very substance of detective fiction itself. On the one hand, detective stories embrace the “homosocial world of the boy’s adventure story” (Francis 640) by sending detective-sidekick duos out into the dangerous underworld of crime.¹¹ On the other hand, detective stories can also be considered ‘domesticated’ as they are more constrained than adventure stories,¹² and bound to certain generic conventions, such as location, characters (and classes) involved, types of crimes, etc. Additionally, and this was already mentioned above, detective fiction of the time – and here the classic, late-nineteenth-century fiction as well as works produced in the genre’s Golden Age can be subsumed under one canopy – traditionally dealt with “family irregularities and the consequences of selfishness” (Kayman 49).

A second way in which Bramah tries to bridge this gap between the “romantic language of heroic masculinity” and the “reassertion of the domesticated and private categories of masculinity” (Francis 640) is the portrayal of Parkinson as an “unquenchable stickler for decorum”, or a “punctilious attendant” with a “perfectly controlled respectful voice” (Bramah 7). This portrayal echoes not only these “nostalgic laments for the faithful Victorian maid” (Todd 181), which Todd says were an ever-present part of 1920s press coverage of the “‘disappearance’ of service” (181), as well as the nostalgia that the sidekick himself is representative and the embodiment of, and which is one reason why Holmes described Watson as “the one fixed point in a changing age” (“HLB” 507). It is also yet another example of the ‘stiff upper lip’ attitude previously expressed by Holmes, and it alludes once again to the patriotic undertone these stories possess. In “The Secret of Headlam Height” such patriotism is expressed through the repeated notions of ‘doing one’s bit’ or ‘business as usual’, both of which seem to be considered “the most patriotic thing to do” (Bramah 18). Parkinson in particular is ‘doing his bit’ by securing the encoded message meant for the German spy at the end of the story, which may not prevent the war – similar to Holmes’s intervention in “His Last Bow” –, but which gives the British at least a strategic and military advantage. Parkinson’s reply to Carrados’s praise of his actions in light of the impending threat – “If you really have got the message, Parkinson, you will deserve a knighthood” (Bramah 40) – is the perfect embodiment of this stoic patriotism when he declares “[t]hank you, sir, but I hope you won’t mention it to anyone. It would be very uncongenial to me to become notorious in any way” (40).

¹¹ Of course, not all detective fiction features a sidekick persona. Nevertheless, even with characters that are not recurring or more limited in their actions than the sidekick – or less constrained – the homosocial aspect so familiar from adventure stories can be observed in a lot of stories that feature a male detective.

¹² As Cawelti points out, adventure stories typically featured “a villain, and . . . one or more attractive young ladies” (39-40).

Martha & Clifton Barker

The representation of the few female characters in both stories looks very different from that of the male ones. At first glance, Martha appears to be a stereotypical representation of an older, female servant. Frequently referred to as “that one old woman” (“HLB” 497), “old Martha” (502), or “the old lady” (503), one is led to believe she is inconsequential both for von Bork and Holmes. This is further emphasised by the fact that she, as opposed to the male characters, who are generally addressed by their last name, is known only as ‘Martha’ or a variation of the phrases used here. This can be seen as symbolic of her servant/employee status, where individual identities in general were of no consequence, even less so for women.¹³ However, there are two passages in which Martha’s particular role within the development of the plot and the solution of the case is recognised and emphasised further. The first situation takes place during a conversation between von Herling and von Bork shortly before the former takes his leave. After musing about the British and their potential inability to react to the German threat adequately, von Herling remarks that “she [Martha] might almost personify Britannia . . . with her complete self-absorption and general air of comfortable somnolence” (497). This situation may not be considered anything more than another dig at the British if it were not for a later scene, during which Holmes clarifies her level of involvement in the entire operation of thwarting von Bork’s plans. After von Bork has been apprehended, chloroformed, and bound, Martha joins the successful detective and his sidekick, and following a brief reassurance that von Bork was indeed unhurt, the importance of her work for the whole cause becomes clear as Holmes states, “[s]o long as you were here I was easy in my mind” (502). Shortly after, he continues with a full explanation of the extent of Martha’s contribution and what it means for the British position in this conflict. Unlike Watson, who seems to have only been involved in the final apprehension that night, Martha had been an ongoing accomplice, acting as a housekeeper in von Bork’s employ, and supplying Holmes constantly with letters and addresses that allowed him to successfully intervene in von Bork’s grand scheme for months. And here I would like to return to von Herling’s assessment of Martha as “Britannia”. What was meant as a deprecating remark, if not an insult, is in fact an excellent description of Martha’s stoic, reliable, if not extraordinarily heroic personality. With her pleasant, polite, and dutiful attitude, she, similar to Watson, represents the “one fixed point in a changing age” as well as the “cleaner, better, stronger land [that] will lie in the sunshine when the storm has cleared” (507).

¹³ Given that Britain is a patrilineal society, women’s initial maiden names were ‘given to them’ by their fathers and would only ever be replaced by a name given to them by their husbands. A British woman’s last name can, therefore, be seen as never truly her own. Thus, while the omission of her last name may be read as a deviation/escape from the patriarchal system in any other context, here it is solely emblematic of her servant status.

Simultaneously to the notion of patriotism and ‘Britishness’, Martha also represents what has been mentioned in connection with Parkinson already, namely the “nostalgic laments for the faithful Victorian maid” (Todd 181) as the representative of a better time gone by, particularly in the context of an ongoing war where much of daily life had changed significantly already.¹⁴ The much feared “‘disappearance’ of service” (181) never materialised in the 1920s, and in fact “the number of servants increased over the course of the 1920s” (185).

Not necessarily the opposite of Martha, but younger and more flamboyant is Clifton Baker. The “professional lady cryptologer” with her “hermaphroditic name” (Bramah 29) appears to be the epitome of the modern woman of the 1920s, but Bramah took it even further than that. Her initial introduction reads as follows:

[a]t the age of fifteen Clifton Baker had made up her mind – a considerable achievement of itself in that era. At twenty-five she spoke all the most useful living languages and wrote the four most important dead ones. Eight letters (which she never by any chance used) after her hermaphroditic name were some evidence of a scientific grounding, while the recital of her attainments in the higher planes of mathematics made elderly professors who were opposed to the movements ooze profusely in the region of the collar. Then chance, in the shape of a baffling testamentary puzzle, threw destiny across her path, and on the assumption that there was room for one professional lady cryptologer in the world Clifton took an office and passed the word round among her friends. (29)

This description appears somewhat flippant and dismissive, particularly because throughout the following pages she is continuously referred to as “the girl” (30), or “the girl . . . forgetting to be coy” (31). Her flirtatious utterances towards and in regard to Max Carrados’s secretary Annesley Greatorex, who apparently “fear[s] and shun[s] her” (30) add to this almost childlike depiction. In addition, the almost condescending tone of the narrator regarding her behaviour, for example her “squeal of maidenly delight” (31) when she spots Max Carrados, is not helpful either. Nonetheless, Clifton’s abilities as a cryptologer are kept in the highest regard by Carrados – why else would he have had her picked up in London and driven down to the coast with such urgency –, and his trust in her being able to finish the difficult if not impossible task at hand in such a short amount of time never seems to waver. And yet it is interesting that the “[g]ood girl” (32) suddenly transforms into a “wonderful woman, Clifton” (33) when the task is indeed completed in time. But if her abilities are so incredibly admirable and her achievements thus far so extraordinary, why the dismissive commentary on her overall behaviour and way of life? Does it matter that “[u]p to that time [when she first started her business] the girl had never really done her hair, and she regarded boots merely as things to protect her feet?” (30). The

¹⁴ With the young male workforce now shifted as soldiers to the frontline, women, who already “made up a substantial part of the industrial workforce even before the First World War”, had to fill even more vacant spaces now as well as being “brought into munitions manufacturing in large numbers” (“12 Things”).

depiction of Clifton Baker might be fuelled by an underlying anxiousness of the (intended) readership towards the flapper culture as Bramah also writes in regards to Clifton that “[e]verybody smiled indulgently and said how typical a product of the age Miss Baker was, and how hopeless it would be, except in this London nineteen-dash, to look for such another” (30). It is interesting, however, that she is paid for her service (to the country) while it is continuously repeated in regard to the efforts of Parkinson and Byles – another (minor) male character formerly employed by Carrados – that they are indeed only ‘doing their bit’ with no payment mentioned for their contribution. This displays a very contradictory attitude when it comes to expectations of duty for one’s own country. Men are expected to step up (for free) whereas women are not, and in the case of Byles, this ‘stepping up’ has the most fatal consequences.

I have alluded previously to the idea that Martha and Clifton Baker could be potentially read as two sides of the same coin, and I would like to return to this thought now. At first glance, the two women are very different and so is their involvement in the respective cases. Martha represents the old in terms of age and times gone by, the traditional and familiar, the reliable. Conversely, Clifton stands for the young, the new, the somewhat unfamiliar, unpredictable, and to some even frightening future of the young (female) generation. At close observation, one can see certain similarities between the two. To begin with, their overall appearances and involvement in the stories are relatively brief, especially compared to the male sidekicks and other minor male characters. Furthermore, their agency is incredibly limited. Both are employed by the respective detective and thus tasked with a particular role to play and assignment to complete. Their dialogue is brief and largely inconsequential. And last but not least, both women are not given much chance to display their own personalities, which is partly due to the limiting generic conventions. Martha is the stereotypical representative of the reliable, old female servant while Clifton Baker is an exaggerated, partly androgynous (name), partly hysterical (behaviour) woman continuously belittled as a “girl” who may be read as somewhat of a ‘*deus ex machina*’ plot device because her incredible credentials and talents as a cryptologer are almost too good to be true – especially considering she is not the main detective, who the readership expects such extraordinary skills from.

Conclusion

To conclude, it appears that the male gender identity as it is presented in these two short stories is inextricably linked with the notions of patriotism or nationalist pride while at the same time teetering on the threshold between flight from or to domesticity. This first idea is expressed not only through a strong sense of duty inherent in the two sidekicks but also through the calm – in the case of Watson almost ignorant – attitude towards the impending threat of war. The British were famous for

their ‘stiff upper lip’ attitude after all, and both Parkinson and Watson are, in their own ways, excellent expressions of this. At the same time, the constant negotiation of “contradictory impulses of domestic responsibility and escapism” (Francis 643) found expression in what Francis called “polyphonic voices of popular culture and politics” (643), which I argue these short stories are an example of. These contradictory impulses are less obvious when assessing the female characters, which may be explained by the very different legal, political, and historical realities for women at the time. While the two sidekicks can, thus, be read as a visualisation of the threshold British masculinity found itself on at the time, the two women Martha and Clifton Baker appear more representative of an entire nation and generation respectively. On the one hand, the “old housekeeper” (“HLB” 497) Martha is a nostalgic reminder of ‘the good old’ Victorian times that are slowly losing their hold on Edwardian society, and yet she also represents the reliable, strong Britannia that is much needed in these difficult times, and which always has been and always will be a cornerstone for British identity. And on the other hand, there is the young flapper Clifton Baker, who herself appears to be in perpetual limbo, stuck and almost undecided between her female, almost exaggeratedly girlish self, and her hermaphroditic, uber-intelligent cryptologer persona. They, too, can be read as a wonderful example of an “ideology . . . not consistent or coherent in itself” (Eagleton *qut.* in Ferreter 132), but one ‘made visible’ through and in detective fiction (Porter 128). Two sides of the same coin at a time of thresholds, expressing the hopes and fears and worries of a British nation faced with the destructive and uncontrollable forces of war.

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