

**VILLAINS, VICTIMS,
AND VIOLETS**

VILLAINS, VICTIMS, AND VIOLETS

Agency and Feminism in the Original Sherlock Holmes Canon

A Studious Scarlets Society Anthology

Edited by

Resa Haile and Tamara R. Bower



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*Villains, Victims, and Violets: Agency and Feminism
in the Original Sherlock Holmes Canon*

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“The world is full of obvious things which nobody by any chance ever observes.”

Sherlock Holmes, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*



“She fought her way out again.”

Strand Magazine, 1908, “Wisteria Lodge”

Arthur Twidale (1879–1937)/Public domain

FOREWORD:
WHO IS SHERLOCK HOLMES?
WHAT IS HE?

NISI SHAWL

What's in a legacy? Especially a literary legacy. Often we authors leave behind more questions and problems for our heirs than answers and solutions. And often we bequeath our worlds and characters and ideas to those whose outlooks differ significantly from our own.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was not a feminist.

Nonetheless, feminist critics and scholars can and do examine his detective fiction to find truths about gender equality and to track trends in the status of women. *Villains, Victims, and Violets: Agency and Feminism in the Original Sherlock Holmes Canon* shares the excitement of these critics' and scholars' discoveries, the heady freedom of a disciplined, intellectual approach to uncovering the oeuvre's unintended secrets. From provocative surveys such as the opening essay by Vicki Delany, "Unable to Save Herself: An Examination of Women as Persons in Three Stories of the Sherlock Holmes Canon," to the piercing particularity of Charlotte Anne Walters' "A Winter's Tale: How Kitty Winter Transcends the Stereotype of the Wronged Woman to Become a Heroic Avenger," this anthology's contributors provide the Holmes/Watson subgenre's analytical precincts with an even-handed application of skeptic-tested reality.

Though he seems to verge in some readers' minds on historicity, Sherlock Holmes is a fictional figure, as of course all are in Conan Doyle's detective stories. This means that Holmesian views on womanhood are thrice filtered: we see them through the eyes of the hero Sherlock

Holmes, and of the narrator John Watson, and of the author—who in turn saw what he saw based on the parameters and proscriptions of his class, gender, and time. The women writing *Villains, Victims, and Violets* scrutinize the resulting discontinuities thoroughly, ever watchful of the gaps in which their imagined sisters operated and flourished. Remark- ing at times on the vast demographic shifts underpinning certain social practices, at times on the scientific and industrial innovations leading to expansions and limitations in cultural roles evident in one or another case, even speculating knowledgably on women characters’ internal lives, as in “Still Waters Run Deviant: The Scheming Librarian” by Liese Sherwood-Fabre, the book’s contributors range satisfyingly far and wide in their exploration of the Holmes Canon’s possible feminist readings.

And yet these essays stay rooted in the stories which gave rise to them. Familiar and unfamiliar plots are outlined amid cogent breakdowns of the motives of governess Grace Dunbar and her ilk in Leah Guinn’s “Thor Bridge in Gaslight.” Careful story summaries support multiple ascriptions of the roles of Eugenia Ronder of “The Veiled Lodger,” in Michelle Birkby’s essay “The Veiled Detective,” and of Laura Lyons, conventionally assumed to be a scheming and malevolent influence in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*—but not in Nicole Kurtz’s thoughtful “Laura Lyons: Hounded by Victorian Ideals.”

As surely as our culture has absorbed other bits of proprietary art and transmuted them into new mythologies—*Star Wars*, Peter Pan, Cthulhu—we have also taken up the Holmes/Watson gestalt, making and remaking it as we see fit. This is how we have come to be rewarded with additions to the Holmes/Watson library such as Claire O’Dell’s *A Study in Honor* and Cynthia Ward’s series of pastiches (beginning with *The Adventure of the Incognita Countess* and *The Adventure of the Dux Bellorum*). Realistically, any depiction of or extrapolation from today’s culture should acknowledge the enormous influence of Conan Doyle’s memorable Holmes/Watson milieu. “The game is a cubic yard,” quips the young protagonist of M.R. Carey’s recent novel *Someone Like Me*, deliberately misquoting Holmes himself while jousting verbally with another teen investigator.

These authors are the inheritors of Conan Doyle’s vast and problematic literary legacy. You and I are, too, along with just about anyone

reading fiction of any sort. That's true whether or not we agree with his philosophies and politics.

To examine the feminism inherent or lacking in Conan Doyle's tales of the great Sherlock Holmes is a natural and necessary part of their inevitable inclusion in our lives. *Villains, Victims, and Violets* does this work entertainingly, with a minimum of jargon—that is to say, none—and a maximum of insight. Read this anthology to marvel at the potential it conveys for new meanings, fresh interpretations, and ever-widening vistas of adventure.

Nisi Shawl wrote the 2016 Nebula finalist Everfair and the 2008 Tiptree Award winner for Filter House. In 2005 she co-wrote Writing the Other: A Practical Approach, a standard text on inclusive representation in the imaginative genres. Shawl is a Carl Brandon Society founder and a Clarion West board member as well as being a member of the Studios Scarlets Society. She lives in Seattle and takes frequent walks with her cat.

INTRODUCTION

A man leaves his fiancée in the night fog and is never seen alive again.

A woman escapes mob life for Norfolk, England, only to find notes in the garden in the secret code of her mobster suitor. The final message is “[p]repare to meet thy God.”

A maid, torn from her bed by the butler who spurned her, is brought on a midnight hunt for a long-hidden treasure that he promises they will steal away with together. As the man drops into the treasure chamber, the seal is lowered, and she leaves him to suffocate.

Sherlock Holmes is the core of these stories, and many more. He has become known as one of the most complex, accessible characters in historical and modern literature. Anywhere you look today, someone you know is writing about him: Kareem Abdul Jabbar’s *Mycroft and Mycroft and Sherlock*, Maria Konnikova’s *Mastermind: How to Think Like Sherlock Holmes*, and Michael Dirda’s *On Conan Doyle Or, The Whole Art of Storytelling*.

You’ll see every subject under the sun—forensics, philosophy, cooking, analytical thinking, and, of course, London—reconsidered through the lens of Sherlock Holmes. The female characters in his world are faced with unique situations. The answers they often find involve this aloof person who is repeatedly deemed sexist by modern writers. Holmes’ fictional biographer, John Watson, reports in one adventure that Holmes has an aversion to women. Is this consistently true? As for the women, coming into his world can be lifesaving or hazardous.

So it’s long since time to apply a different lens to the women who engage and motivate Sherlock Holmes. As members of the Studious Scarlets Society, a Baker Street Irregulars scion and online group of

women Sherlockian writers who hail from across the globe,* it is our particular purview to scrutinize the women in, around, and behind the stories in the Canon in these essays. The center of each is agency—the opportunities for independence and self-determination, which were few and far between in Victorian England—and the particular character’s role in the story. What we find all too often are silences around the women. And yet, women in the stories—clients, villains, victims, and Violets—are pivotal in the world of Sherlock Holmes.

Sara Gran’s novel, *Claire DeWitt and the City of the Dead*, mirrors the Holmesian oeuvre. Jacques Silette, Claire’s late mentor, is the author of the detective’s handbook *Détectation*. His book is similar to one Sherlock Holmes mentions in “The Adventure of the Abbey Grange,” a book he will write in his retirement: “I propose to devote my declining years to the composition of a textbook which shall focus the whole art of detection into one volume.”

Sharp, provocative quotations from Silette’s opus are sprinkled throughout Gran’s novel:

There are no innocent victims . . . The victim selects his role as carefully and unconsciously as the policeman, the detective, the client, or the villain. Each chooses his role and then forgets this, sometimes for many lifetimes, until one comes along who can remind him. This time you may be the villain or the victim. The next time your roles may switch.

However, he tells Claire, “It is only a role. Try to remember.”

Surely Sherlock Holmes would argue against this after his experiences with the victims he’s helped, even the victims he’s failed to save. Indeed, after everything he must have witnessed—at times in disguise in the roughest environs of London—Holmes would know how little choice a victim, or even sometimes a villain, might really have. While some (ahem, Watson) might accept Holmes as a misogynist, the evidence of the stories shows otherwise. Holmes shows respect for his female clients

*This explains the variety of spellings and usage herein: our members, the authors of the essays, live in the U.S., Canada, the U.K., India, Australia, and all points worldwide.

as well as respect for the victim and respect for women's opinions and observations.

However, even Holmes reverts to his role as a man of distinction in Victorian England. For example, he refers to Lady Frances Carfax as:

[o]ne of the most dangerous classes in the world . . . the drifting and friendless woman. She is the most harmless and often the most useful of mortals, but she is the inevitable inciter of crime in others. She is helpless. She is migratory. She has sufficient means to take her from country to country and from hotel to hotel. She is lost, as often as not, in a maze of obscure pensions and boardinghouses. She is a stray chicken in a world of foxes. When she is gobbled up she is hardly missed.

There is something about the above quote in Silette's book, though, that Holmes understands—Silette is telling Claire that she may be the villain or the victim; her role will change.

What makes a woman a villain? Is it her agency? Is becoming a villain a way for the Victorian woman to take control of her life? What about the role of a female character as victim? What ability does she have to determine an outcome? What are her strengths, and does she overcome? Indeed, how we define the word *victim* at all is a matter of perspective. Some might define a victim as someone weak who can never fight back, or use their agency, or win. But in life, almost everyone at some point is a victim of something or someone. If we define a victim as someone to whom bad things have been done or happened, then what the victim does within those circumstances can be inspiring.

Sometimes there may be a hair's breadth between villain and victim. Grace Dunbar in "The Problem of Thor Bridge" has become one of the more controversial female characters in the Canon, and the story is interesting and troubling to examine in the wake of the #me too movement initiated by activist Tarana Burke. Young governess Grace Dunbar stays with an employer who makes his wife's life hell. He has made improper advances to Grace but has promised to stop so she will stay, and has (so far) kept his word. For Grace's part, she has other

family members depending on her income, and she seeks to influence her employer for good in his business dealings, but she either does not or cannot use this influence with him to mitigate his hand in his wife's suffering.

Is she the victim or the villain? While many commentators are not sympathetic to Grace, June Thomson, in her biography of the detective and the doctor, *Holmes and Watson*, posits a happy future for Grace as the second Mrs. Watson, far away from her odious employer. In *Villains, Victims, and Violets*, Leah Guinn and Geri Schear each take a look at Grace Dunbar. Guinn's initial assessment finds a young woman with hopes that a position with such a prominent family will offer the ultimate benefit of a husband: "If fate smiled on her, this could prove to be her last post." Guinn adds that Holmes sees in Miss Dunbar a "'strong, clear-cut and sensitive face,' coupled with 'the appealing, helpless expression of the hunted creature who feels the nets around it,'" a ringing endorsement of the lady's obvious character.

Schear agrees that Maria Gibson and Governess Grace "are passionate, independent, and courageous;" but the similarities end there. Schear continues: "yet none of [the other villains] compares with the woman who is, arguably, the greatest villain in the Sherlock Holmes Canon," Maria Gibson. Schear points to Mrs. Maria Pinto Gibson as the villain, not "doe-eyed" Grace: "Despite Dunbar's beauty and seeming virtue, Maria Gibson is a more sympathetic character, even if she is as mad as a box of frogs." Two views of the same women. Two different conclusions. Jayantika Ganguly also examines Mrs. Gibson and comes down on the side of her being the victim. The kaleidoscope spins, and the view is changed.

But it's not as simple as differing views or how we define the word victim. It is the definition from one person's perspective. Of the many circumstances faced by the female characters, an example of both at once is Kitty Winter, who is brought into the story of "The Illustrious Client" in the hope of helping another woman, Violet de Merville. Kitty must decide whether to act or not, and in what way she can respond to the man who ruined her life by kicking her out of his house, consigning her to a life on the streets.

Charlotte Anne Walters, in her essay, “A Winter’s Tale: How Kitty Winter Transcends the Stereotype of a Wronged Woman to Become a Heroic Avenger,” reveals a character who rejects one side of the mirror or the other; Walters calls her the “fiery and fabulous Kitty Winter”:

Kitty . . . defies simple categorization . . . when she states, “What I am Adelbert Gruner made me,” [she] appears to be simply reacting to events of her past. It becomes clear, however, that despite the pressures and demands of the society around her, she is willing and able to make choices for herself and take action, that is, to assert agency.

And then there are the Violets. In the Sherlock Holmes stories, there are four of them—not as many as there are Marys or Alices, but a memorable set nonetheless. The two major Violets, Miss Hunter and Miss Smith, are brave and resourceful, turning the tables on devious employers. The minor, the Misses de Merville and Westbury, have complete faith in fiancés who may or may not be deserving. Whether foolhardy or resourceful, the Violets all achieve some sort of agency and strength of character while maintaining an essential goodness.

Some of the women have an impossible situation to live through, let alone surmount. One character’s father has brutally beaten her all her life. Well-meaning bystanders, as is often the only help a Victorian woman may hope for, have attempted to stop the violence with little to no impact. Sonia Fetherston, in her essay “She Blessed the Hand,” writes, “It is left to one man, an elderly vicar, to try and intervene on their behalf. Carey deals this well-meaning savior a ‘savage assault.’ The women are once more left to their fate.”

When can a woman’s agency be asserted? Sometimes it is only after the fact that she finds her voice. In her essay “Still Waters Run Deviant,” Liese Sherwood-Fabre quotes Chris Vogler in *The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*: “even the villain is the hero of their own story.” Sherwood-Fabre adds that “in the case of ‘The Adventure of the Cardboard Box,’ point of view means everything.”

Indeed, you will see this reflected in the analysis of the women in the Sherlock Holmes stories.

And then there is the case of Sherlock Holmes. Writers and readers tend to think of him as being outside of the circumstances of his clients. This is not the case according to the Great Detective himself, as Amy Thomas writes:

Sherlock Holmes relates an intriguing detail of his career in “The Five Orange Pips,” informing his prospective client that he has “been beaten four times—three times by men, and once by a woman.”

Who is this woman, and how could she possibly have gotten the better of him?

These essays are distinguished because they are by noted Sherlockian women authors, including Bonnie MacBird, Michelle Birkby, Nicole Givens Kurtz, and Angela Misri; the varying degrees of agency in characters’ lives and stories are closely analyzed by people who have immersed themselves in the original Sherlock Holmes Canon.

In the Sherlock Holmes stories, we find women extraordinary and ordinary—a respectable wife who rushes into a disreputable den to save her husband, mothers who do not always do the best for their children, daughters trapped by a wicked parent as if in a fairy tale—all just a bit more than they seem at a glance. Villains, victims, Violets—or bits of two or all three—are women finding their agency and their personhood, in a time when women weren’t supposed to be this complex.

Tamara R. Bower & Resa Haile

PUBLICATION DATES OF THE SHERLOCK HOLMES STORIES

	FIRST PUBLICATION DATES	TITLES OF STORIES
01	1887 Nov	A Study in Scarlet
02	1890 Feb	The Sign of Four
03	1891 Jul	A Scandal in Bohemia
04	1891 Aug	The Red-Headed League
05	1891 Sep	A Case of Identity
06	1891 Oct	The Boscombe Valley Mystery
07	1891 Nov	The Five Orange Pips
08	1891 Dec	The Man with the Twisted Lip
09	1892 Jan	The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle
10	1892 Feb	The Adventure of the Speckled Band
11	1892 Mar	The Adventure of the Engineer's Thumb
12	1892 Apr	The Adventure of the Noble Bachelor
13	1892 May	The Adventure of the Beryl Coronet
14	1892 Jun	The Adventure of the Copper Beeches
15	1892 Dec	The Adventure of Silver Blaze
16	1893 Jan	The Adventure of the Cardboard Box
17	1893 Feb	The Adventure of the Yellow Face
18	1893 Mar	The Adventure of the Stock-Broker's Clerk
19	1893 Apr	The Adventure of the "Gloria Scott"
20	1893 May	The Adventure of the Musgrave Ritual
21	1893 Jun	The Adventure of the Reigate Squires
22	1893 Jul	The Adventure of the Crooked Man
23	1893 Aug	The Adventure of the Resident Patient
24	1893 Sep	The Adventure of the Greek Interpreter
25	1893 Oct, Nov	The Adventure of the Naval Treaty
26	1893 Dec	The Adventure of the Final Problem
27	1901 Aug–1902	The Hound of the Baskervilles
28	1903 Sep	The Adventure of the Empty House
29	1903 Oct	The Adventure of the Norwood Builder
30	1903 Dec	The Adventure of the Dancing Men
31	1903 Dec	The Adventure of the Solitary Cyclist
32	1904 Jan	The Adventure of the Priory School
33	1904 Feb	The Adventure of Black Peter

(continued)

PUBLICATION DATES OF THE SHERLOCK HOLMES STORIES

	FIRST PUBLICATION DATES	TITLES OF STORIES
34	1904 Mar	The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton
35	1904 Apr	The Adventure of the Six Napoleons
36	1904 Jun	The Adventure of the Three Students
37	1904	The Adventure of the Golden Pince-Nez
38	1904	The Adventure of the Missing Three-Quarter
39	1904 Sep	The Adventure of the Abbey Grange
40	1904 Dec	The Adventure of the Second Stain
41	1908 Aug	The Adventure of Wisteria Lodge
42	1908 Dec	The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans
43	1910 Dec	The Adventure of the Devil's Foot
44	1911 Mar, Apr	The Adventure of the Red Circle
45	1911 Dec	The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax
46	1913 Nov	The Adventure of the Dying Detective
47	1914 Sep–1915	The Valley of Fear
48	1917 Sep	His Last Bow
49	1921 Oct	The Adventure of the Mazarin Stone
50	1922 Feb, Mar	The Problem of Thor Bridge
51	1923 Mar	The Adventure of the Creeping Man
52	1924 Jan	The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire
53	1924 Oct	The Adventure of the Three Garridebs
54	1924 Nov	The Adventure of the Illustrious Client
55	1926 Sep	The Adventure of the Three Gables
56	1926 Oct	The Adventure of the Blanched Soldier
57	1926 Nov	The Adventure of the Lion's Mane
58	1926 Dec	The Adventure of the Retired Colourman
59	1927 Jan	The Adventure of the Veiled Lodger
60	1927 Mar	The Adventure of Shoscombe Old Place

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I

ARE WOMEN PERSONS IN THE VICTORIAN ERA?

“I have seen too much not to know that the impression of a woman may be more valuable than the conclusion of an analytical reasoner.”

Sherlock Holmes, “The Man with the Twisted Lip”

“Women are never to be entirely trusted,—not the best of them.”

Sherlock Holmes, *The Sign of the Four*



“Holmes shook his head gravely.”
Strand Magazine, 1892, “The Copper Beeches”
Sidney Paget (1860–1908)/Public domain

UNABLE TO SAVE HERSELF: AN EXAMINATION OF WOMEN AS PERSONS IN THREE STORIES OF THE SHERLOCK HOLMES CANON

VICKI DELANY

I have been interested for some time in studying the way that, in popular culture, women are rarely portrayed as “People.” Women play women. Men play men, but they also play people, not only in major roles but often just as minor or background characters.

In modern times, there’s no excuse for only casting female actors as women as, with the possible exception of a boxing club or men’s sports team, women can and do fulfil all roles in life.

But such cannot be said for the past. In the Victorian era, more than at perhaps any other time in the western world, women’s roles in society were so restricted that they could not act as anything other than women.

For the purposes of this essay I will define agency as a character’s ability to act freely or exert power or influence, to make choices, and control her life in a defined world.

I will define person as a human being regarded as an individual.

In Kathryn Hughes’ 2014 article for the British Library, “Gender Roles in the 19th Century,” she says, “During the Victorian period men and women’s roles became more sharply defined than at any time in history.”

Particularly in the middle or upper classes, any form of employment, and most out-of-the-home activities, such as the pursuit of higher education, were closed to them. (The exception being the governess, so beloved of historical fiction, discussed below.) Expectations around women’s roles, behaviour, and deportment were so strictly defined

that individuality itself was largely stripped from the Victorian woman, rendering her a woman rather than a fully-formed person.

Women were, even in their own lives, not people. They were limited to only acting as women. And, at that time, acting as a woman often meant having no free will at all. Women had no agency: they could not act on their own behalf. They did as asked, commanded, or expected. And the last was no less powerful a force than the first two.

In her article, “Victorian Ideals: The Influence of Society’s Ideals on Victorian Relationships,” Felicia Appell says:

The expectations men had for women caused women to prepare for marriage [solely] and gave women hardly any freedom. The men’s expectations pressured women to be the ideal Victorian woman society expected them to be. The women had to prepare themselves for what was to come of their lives and it determined their future. If a woman did not meet the expectations of the Victorian male, she would end up spouseless.

The stories of the Sherlock Holmes Canon provide powerful proof of this lack of women’s agency, but some of them also give us a hint that there were strong women prepared to ignore social dictates. Sherlock Holmes himself appears to approve of such conduct.

In “The Adventure of the Speckled Band,” Miss Helen Stoner calls on Sherlock Holmes at 221B Baker Street, in fear for her life. She suspects she is in danger from the same unknown forces that killed her sister, Julia, two years ago. So clear is her terror, so strong are her suspicions, so firm is her case, that Sherlock Holmes immediately believes her and acts accordingly by agreeing to help her.

Miss Stoner could only, in this story, be a woman. She is not a person, meaning her role could not be played by a man. She has absolutely no ability to save herself, even under threat to her own life. She fears her abusive stepfather (a man everyone knows to be unstable and abusive), but she has to remain in his house; although she is in her thirties, she cannot remove herself from his control. She has no money of her own and no ability to earn any. She would risk extreme societal displeasure,

and she has no place to move to even if she did want to do so, and no opportunities for employment.

Her inheritance will only come to her on her marriage, which, she tells Holmes, will happen shortly. That her late mother left her and her sister money, but under the condition that it come to them on their marriage, isn't even commented upon by Holmes or Dr. Watson. It is clear that not only Miss Stoner's mother, but the Great Detective and his sidekick, not to mention Miss Stoner herself, think that to be a natural enough state of affairs. Can we assume that Mrs. Roylott didn't think her daughters capable of managing their own affairs? That they needed at first a father-figure and then a husband to do that for them? Why else would she have put this restriction on her daughters, and thus unknowingly placed their lives in danger? The daughters were deliberately left unable to act as their own agents under the terms of their mother's will.

"The Speckled Band" is set in April of 1883, so Dr. Watson tells us, and was published in 1892. If the story had taken place only thirteen years prior, Mrs. Roylott would not have been able to leave any money to her daughters, even with conditions. Fortunately, 1870 saw the passage in England of the Married Woman's Property Act, before which the money of a married woman, whether earned or inherited, belonged to her husband, not to her.

It is interesting that Helen's fiancé, one Percy Armitage, refuses to acknowledge her fears or respect her feelings. Not only does he not come to her aid, but he doesn't consider her concerns valid: he does not think her capable of acting as her own agent—of taking steps to protect herself. Percy considers her fears to be, as Helen says to Holmes and Watson, "the fancies of a nervous woman." The only action she can take, and she bravely does so, is to beg Sherlock Holmes to act on her behalf.

But Holmes, that great observer of human nature, does believe her. And he believes her without question. Once she has left, he says to Watson, "We have not a moment to lose."

Simply by coming to Holmes and Watson's rooms, Miss Stoner engages in a shocking breach of custom—she relies on a stranger to act in place of her fiancé to protect her from her vicious stepfather. The picture painted here of English family life is not a good one. But Holmes himself does not have a positive view of the family, so beloved