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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/adaptation/apv004>

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| Title | Canon Doyle? : Getting Holmes right (and getting the rights) for television |
| Authors | Hewett, RJ |
| Publication title | Adaptation |
| Publisher | Oxford Journals |
| Type | Article |
| USIR URL | This version is available at: http://usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/34069/ |
| Published Date | 2015 |

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Canon Doyle?: Getting Holmes Right (and Getting the Rights) for Television

Richard Hewett

Introduction

Given the developments in adaptation studies over recent years, an article on television representations of Sherlock Holmes which prided themselves on fidelity to Conan Doyle might seem somewhat retrograde. The field has long since moved beyond what Sarah Cardwell terms ‘cultural adaptation’ (Cardwell 13-15), where the primary focus of study is the relationship between a screen adaptation and the literary text from which it derives. This ‘centre-based’ approach, designed to examine the fidelity of the screen version to the perceived ‘original’, ignores the possibility of ‘genetic’ adaptation, in which the accumulated intertextual influences of manifold versions of the same text can influence both the form taken by any new adaptation and the readings which may be placed upon it.

As highlighted by Thomas M. Leitch, screen versions of Sherlock Holmes have, since his cinematic debut,¹ accumulated a range of elements *not* deriving from Doyle’s original source material. The iconography of Holmes in the majority is drawn ‘not merely from [the] literary originals but from a mixture of visual texts, from illustrations to earlier film and television versions’ (208). Leitch points out that such iconic images as Holmes’ deerstalker and inverness cape,² not to mention the curved calabash pipe, do not in fact originate in Doyle’s writings, though he is erroneous in claiming that ‘movie audiences know that Watson wears a mustache and Holmes is clean-shaven, but they do not know this because Conan Doyle ever says so’ (ibid); the former at least is stated in

“The Naval Treaty” (Conan Doyle 397).³ Assertions by Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat, executive producers of *Sherlock* (2010-), that ‘everything is canonical’ (Mumford 9; “PBS Online Chat with Steven Moffat”) would seem to support Leitch’s claim that such works are ‘hybrid adaptations that depart from their putative originals at any number of points, often choosing to remain faithful to unauthorized later versions’ (208). A glance at Holmes’ film and television credits shows that such productions easily outweigh ‘direct’ adaptations. Indeed, literary pastiches and parodies had begun to proliferate long before Doyle’s death, the author himself making some notable contributions.⁴

This article, however, has as its focus those UK television adaptations which went against the trend by attempting to adhere as closely as possible to Doyle’s stories. Rather than being a centre-led exercise in analysing textual fidelity, the aim is to illustrate the motivations behind a ‘faithful’ approach, in particular the need to appease the copyright holders to the Sherlock Holmes tales in order to ensure permission to broadcast. The importance of rights ownership is one that has been little considered in adaptation studies, though Jonathan Bignells’s paper at the 2013 *Beckett at Reading* conference recently highlighted the importance of legal constraints with regard to BBC versions of Samuel Beckett’s work. At the time of writing, the question of rights ownership in the United States has only recently been resolved, the estate’s attempt to extract a \$5,000 licence fee from Leslie Klinger for the publication of a new volume of stories having been thrown out by the Supreme Court (Hurley). This means that any aspiring Stateside adaptors now enjoy the same freedom available in Britain since the stories entered the public domain in 1980, fifty years after Doyle’s death. Until that point, as Leitch has observed, ‘adaptations that ... felt free to take the entire Holmes franchise rather than any particular adventure as a source text ... generally set

themselves against the wishes of the Doyle estate' (213). However, following Doyle's passing the administration of his estate became 'both more activist and less consistent in their attempts to control the content of the franchise' (218). Executive power initially passed to son Denis, and then, following his death in 1955, his brother Adrian, who each displayed a somewhat contradictory attitude towards the use made of their father's material. Whereas in the US permission was given for a series of Universal feature films which only loosely observed the stricture that they be based on Doyle's stories (213), in addition to a Broadway musical⁵ and several non-canonical television pastiches,⁶ in the United Kingdom the brothers proved extremely exacting in their specifications for televised Holmes dramas. While permissions were freely granted for British feature films not deriving from Doyle tales,⁷ plus various one-off television comedy parodies,⁸ any potential series or serial adaptors were, as will be seen, expected to pay close observance to the original texts. Quite why this should have been the case remains unclear; even Sir Arthur himself had not always insisted on such fidelity to Holmes' adventures during his lifetime.⁹ However, the grudging blessings of Denis and Adrian – which placed severe restrictions not only on *what* could be adapted, but *how* – resulted in a handful of television adaptations for which fidelity was the ultimate goal. The selection for study of those programmes which actively sought the familial seal of approval thus illustrates the extent to which Doyle's authorship was maintained and extended after his death.

The case studies utilized herein are the BBC's 1951 series, starring Alan Wheatley as Holmes, and their 1965-68 productions, initially featuring Douglas Wilmer, and later revived with Peter Cushing in the lead.¹⁰ Although several one-offs have also been made,¹¹ the above were the only series versions of Sherlock Holmes

produced in Britain before the rights lapsed, indicating the difficulties of transferring the detective to the small screen under the watchful eye of the estate. While Granada's various Jeremy Brett series (1984-94) are probably the most celebrated of the television adaptations today, little work has been conducted on earlier versions, aside of Tom Steward briefly asserting that 'UK television adaptations of the 1960s were criticized by fans (who were often cast members) for producers' lack of detailed knowledge of the Conan Doyle stories' (141). In fact, as will be seen, great pains were taken behind the scenes of both the 1951 and 1960s productions to eschew non-canonical elements and adhere as closely as possible to Doyle's original texts, deliberately downplaying signifiers deriving from other adaptations.

Drawing on original production material and Audience Research Reports from the BBC's Written Archives Centre, this article highlights the hitherto little-examined question of to what extent 'getting it right' is dependent upon 'getting the rights' when transferring a well-known yet much-adapted figure such as Holmes for television.

SHERLOCK HOLMES AT THE BBC

The first televised series of Sherlock Holmes was transmitted as six live episodes between October and December 1951, each billed in the *Radio Times* under the banner *We Present Alan Wheatley as Mr Sherlock Holmes in....* Raymond Francis co-starred as Watson, while Bill Owen's Inspector Lestrade and Iris Vandeleur's Mrs Hudson made four appearances apiece. Ian Atkins produced and directed, and script-writing duties were undertaken by *The Observer's* film critic, C.A. Lejeune.

While it is unclear when the decision was taken to mount the series, it had its origins in the Festival of Britain, held in the summer of 1951. Marylebone Council's

contribution was the Sherlock Holmes Exhibition, mounted at Abbey House, 221B Baker Street, from May to September. The centrepiece was Michael Weight's reproduction of Holmes and Watson's rooms ('Sherlock Holmes Collection – How it all began'), and the exhibit's huge popularity had a marked influence on designs for the television series. However, before this was screened, another Holmes production went before the BBC cameras; one which holds the distinction of being the first presentation of Doyle's detective on British television.¹² Broadcast live on 29 July, 'The Adventure of the Mazarin Stone' formed part of the *For the Children* strand. Produced by Alan Bromly, it starred Andrew Osborn as Holmes and Philip King as Watson, and also utilized Weight's festival exhibit as the basis for its Baker Street interior. Weight's £5.5.0d ex-gratia payment was therefore shared between this production and Ian Atkins' (Box); apparently the only commonality between the two.

The estate's permission was sought several months before transmission, but there was evidently some confusion over who was able to grant this, a fact which nearly placed the production in jeopardy. In June 1945, Denis Conan Doyle had requested that all future business propositions be addressed directly to him, and not through his father's literary agents, Messrs A.P. Watt & Son (quoted in Candler). When Denis left the country in 1950 he instructed the BBC to deal with Messrs Vertue & Churcher, solicitors for the estate, during his absence (ibid). However, on 5 July 1951 it was Denis's younger brother Adrian with whom the BBC communicated to seek permission for the planned series (Candler). This was granted on 27 July, on the understanding that all content be confined to Great Britain (ibid). Pre-production had in fact commenced two months earlier, Michael Barry already having sent a draft of the opening episode, 'The Empty House', to Head of Drama Val Gielgud, plus synopses for 'A Scandal in

Bohemia', 'The Six Napoleons' and 'The Dying Detective' (Barry 16 May). Production had reached the scheduling stage when Adrian's letter of permission arrived (Barry 27 July).

It must therefore have come as a shock when, in September, Vertue & Churcher informed the Corporation that only Denis Conan Doyle had the authority to grant permission, and this was now being withheld. The BBC's Head of Copyright immediately contacted Denis at the Grand Hotel, Venice, evidently panicked by the revelation that 'neither you nor your brother wish our television versions to be used, at least for the present' (Candler). Quite why Adrian had decided to withdraw permission is unclear, but the Corporation swiftly pointed out that 'as we had no reason to suppose your brother was not acting with proper authority we are entitled to go ahead with our plans' (ibid). However, the BBC was clearly keen to resolve any objections, even offering to send a representative to Venice to negotiate. This note of desperation indicates the prestige which the Corporation evidently attached to the project, and their placatory tone was strengthened in the closing paragraph: 'The Television Department have asked me to add that the adaptations by Miss Lejeune have proved to be of quite outstanding merit, and I am quite sure that neither you nor your brother could have any objection from the artistic point of view' (ibid).

In fact, the scripts were far from complete, at least two of the six episodes still being in synopsis form only (Lejeune 19 Sept.). It is not known whether the Venetian *rendezvous* ever took place, but what is clear is that Denis Conan Doyle ultimately agreed the series could go ahead. This permission was not, however, lightly given, a later memo from Val Gielgud's secretary twice affirming that 'it took a great deal of persuasion to get Mr Denis Conan Doyle to allow the televising of these stories' (Read).

By early November, presumably returned from his travels, Denis expressed interest in visiting the Lime Grove studios, indicating a slight thaw in attitude towards the project. Michael Barry immediately extended an invitation (6 Nov.), though whether this was taken up is unknown.

It can be seen that the Conan Doyle estate was sending somewhat mixed signals, not least with regard to who had the power to grant permission for televising Sherlock Holmes. When Adrian became the estate's representative four years later his negotiations with the BBC proved no less fraught. However, on this first occasion the Corporation made the mistake (in the eyes of the copyright holders) of commencing work before clearance had been given, an error they would not repeat. While Lejeune's scripts were not as far advanced as the Corporation led Denis to believe, the Conan Doyle brothers would not appear to have had any actual creative input, their sole concern being whether the stories should be transmitted. The fact that permission was finally granted indicates that the scripts' fidelity was such that no objection could be raised, and in this light it is interesting to consider the press release issued by the Corporation for the series launch:

The series will bring Holmes to life as he was, neither guying nor modernising him; giving him none of the scientific aids that the modern detective has; in short, trying not to offend the most inveterate Holmes enthusiast. To this end producer Ian Atkins has read every book 'under the sun' about Holmes; has made many visits to the recent exhibition at Baker Street, and acknowledges much help and information from Mr C.T. Thorno, organizer of the exhibition and a great Holmesian. (*BBC Television News*)

Aside of the reference to Holmes 'as he was' – bearing out Leitch's claims regarding popular 'disavowal of [his] fictional status' (211) – what is striking here is the statement's stress on period accuracy, an element with which few previous Holmes

adaptations had concerned themselves.¹³ This was no media hyperbole; files show that the production team were making close reference to the original publications from the outset, even compiling a list referring to the ‘Original Illustrations by Sidney Paget’, which demonstrates notable concern with perfecting Holmes’ attire as presented in the early publications. Pointing out that the famous deerstalker was popularized by William Gillette in his stage appearances, the researcher concludes that the hat should only make an appearance in one episode, ‘The Reigate Squires’, when Holmes visits the countryside. Meanwhile, C.A. Lejeune’s letters to Atkins reveal both the challenge of adapting the stories for television, and a desire to maintain fidelity, Lejeune pointing out that the only phrases queried by the producer were in fact Doyle’s own (n.d.).

This correspondence highlights a problem which many subsequent adaptors would lament: the fact that a large number of the Holmes stories are not ideally suited for television. Narratives frequently consist of *ex post* reported speech, and several tales are comprised entirely of conversations conducted in the Baker Street rooms. A degree of ‘opening up’ is therefore necessary, quite aside of the fact that, if Watson’s first-person narrative is not retained (as was usually the case on television), a degree of re-writing is required to incorporate him into much of the on-screen action.¹⁴

In the event, the BBC’s attempts to keep faith with the Conan Doyle originals (and the estate) were generally received positively. The opening episode, ‘The Empty House’, achieved a reasonable Reaction Index of 68, which later peaked at 72 for “The Second Stain” (Barry 9 Jan.). The BBC’s Audience Research Department reported that, while the majority of reaction was favourable

...there was a fair amount of criticism from two groups. Those who had little initial interest in the Sherlock Holmes stories often found this play dull, slow and ‘old-fashioned’, [sic] (possibly because they were used to

the slick ‘Americanised’ thriller) and a few complained that it was ‘naïve’. On the other hand some were disappointed by the adaptation which they thought confusing and over-condensed. (*Audience Research Report* Week 42)

Clearly any attempt to remain faithful to Doyle risked alienating modern viewers accustomed to faster-paced fare, while aggravating Holmes purists by any reduction or loss of original dialogue. The episodes, none of which remain in the archive,¹⁵ generally ran to forty minutes, and Lejeune’s scripts tread a delicate line between re-ordering or transferring scenes which, in the written form, take place as flashbacks, without doing undue damage to Doyle’s dialogue, which is frequently transferred with only minor variations or additions (though the non-canonical ‘Elementary, my dear Watson’, does make an appearance).

The primarily positive response to the series suggests that an appreciative audience did indeed exist for a ‘faithful’ adaptation; however, no further episodes were commissioned. Lack of publicity for the series, combined with the difficulties of negotiating with Denis Conan Doyle, were sufficient to discourage the BBC from embarking on additional adventures. When they resumed their efforts, the legal control exerted by Doyle’s heirs had a more immediate impact on the form the series would take.

Whereas in 1951 the estate only become involved in the series after work had commenced, for the 1965 version Adrian Conan Doyle was consulted at virtually every stage of production, either directly or via his legal representative, Henry E. Lester. The idea for a series of Holmes adaptations was proposed in May 1963 by producer Vere Lorrimer to Tom Sloan, Head of Light Entertainment, who then prompted Assistant Head of Copyright E. Caffey to approach the Conan Doyle solicitors, Vertue &

Churcher. While no reply is on record, it would seem that their response was encouraging, as by 2 July Caffey was keen to know which stories Sloan might be interested in adapting, with a view to making an offer. Not receiving a firm answer, on 17 July Caffey urged a quick decision, warning ‘This is obviously a valuable property which might be snapped up by the opposition’. Sloan now wrote to Sydney Newman, Head of Television Drama, pointing out that the Holmes stories were ‘probably available for television’. Sloan suggested Bernard Archard as lead, adding that he himself would be happy to produce. On 12 August Newman replied, explaining that an anthology series entitled *Detective* was currently in preparation, featuring weekly adaptations of different literary detectives which ‘we could afterwards exploit in a full series of their own should they prove successful’.¹⁶ Doyle’s work was being considered for inclusion, ‘so you see, Sherlock Holmes will not be forgotten.’

As ever, the question of rights ownership was a confused one. On 7 October, BBC Head of Copyright R.G. Walford wrote to Vertue & Churcher suggesting a series of 50-minute television episodes, but was then telephoned by Henry Lester, proprietor of Sir Nigel Films (named after Doyle’s 1906 historical novel), with the information that he alone now controlled the film and television rights on all stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (Walford 10 Oct.). Walford wrote to Lester on 10 October acknowledging this, and sent a second letter on the 28th setting out proposed fees. Contract negotiations proceeded over the next two months, during which time Walford met with Adrian Conan Doyle to explain the idea for ‘piloting’ a Holmes episode on *Detective*. Upon learning that each segment of the anthology series would be ‘topped and tailed’ by an introduction from Rupert Davies, in character as popular BBC detective Maigret, Doyle requested (and was given) approval of Davies’ script for the Holmes instalment

(Walford 6 Dec.). He then obtained an amendment to the draft contract, by which the collection of short stories he had co-authored with John Dickson Carr, *The Exploits of Sherlock Holmes* (1954), would be included among those available for adaptation (Walford 10 Dec.). Although none of these were ultimately used, *The Exploits* provided an intriguing bargaining chip several years later, when the BBC attempted to acquire the rights to the characters of Holmes and Watson.

The contract was finally signed on 6 January 1964, making available all Holmes material bar short stories ‘A Scandal in Bohemia’, ‘The Adventure of the Final Problem’ and ‘The Adventure of the Empty House’ (possibly being held back for the planned musical *Baker Street*), while the novel *The Hound of the Baskervilles* would not become available until 1 May 1965. The contract also contained a number of specifications with regard to fidelity to the source material:

In any dramatisations given in accordance with this agreement the BBC undertakes to preserve as far as possible the time period of the stories as in their original form and also as far as possible the original characterisations created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle ... No biographical references to the late Sir Arthur Conan Doyle shall be made by the BBC in connection with the Sherlock Holmes stories ... unless and until the accuracy of such references shall first have been checked and approved by ... Adrian Conan Doyle (or in his absence by his duly appointed agent). (*Agreement* 1 Jan. 1964)

The BBC agreed to pay £500 apiece for the initial five episodes (one transmission plus one repeat), with a £500-per-episode option on a further eight stories, £650 each for a further thirteen, and £750 each for a further twenty-six (Walford 10 Jan.).

The story selected for *Detective* ‘pilot’ was ‘The Speckled Band’, in which Holmes uncovers a plot by Dr Grimesby Roylott to do away with his stepdaughter, Helen. Interestingly, this was one of the short stories C.J. Lejeune had rejected as

unsuitable for the 1951 series, although Conan Doyle himself had successfully adapted it as a stage play, *The Stonor Case*, in 1910.

The episode was produced by David Goddard and written by Giles Cooper, with direction by Robin Midgley. On screen, Douglas Wilmer's Holmes was joined by Nigel Stock as Doctor Watson, who would become the one constant between the 1965 and 1968 series. Adrian Conan Doyle seemed keen to associate himself with the production, suggesting that the *Tonight* (BBC, 1957-65) programme might wish to interview him for a promotional feature. Although this offer was not taken up, David Goddard and R.G. Walford organized an alternative: an interview to be included as part of the *Presentation* (BBC, 1964) slot (Walford 12 Mar.).

Transmitted on BBC1 on Monday 18 May, 'The Speckled Band' was a success with viewers, critics and BBC executives alike, achieving a Reaction Index of 76 – well above the average of 60 for earlier plays in the series. One student viewer commented that 'Sherlock Holmes can still knock modern detective stories into a cocked hat' (*Audience Research Report* Week 21), and a local government officer, while observing that 'the style was, perhaps, somewhat dated', added that 'it was good to escape into Victorian England for a while and get away from the pseudo slick and routine of crime films' (ibid). Donald Baverstock, BBC1 Chief of Programmes, wrote to Sydney Newman that the programme 'came off superbly well. It must have been the most enjoyable of the series so far ... we ought to discuss a spin off series'. Director of Television Kenneth Adam also wrote 'to congratulate all concerned, and I do mean all, on the splendid faithfulness and style of last night's production ... I am sure ours was one of the very best ever' (19 May). Adam later reported that 'the Board of Governors unanimously and unreservedly praised the Sherlock Holmes episode in *Detective*, on

grounds of style, faithfulness, and good casting. They very much hoped there might be more' (21 May). What is notable about this feedback is that it was the authenticity and fidelity for which the production team strove – and upon which the estate insisted – that appealed to the majority. The Audience Research Report pointed out, however, that 'a handful' of the 441 canvassed felt 'the dialogue was stilted and the story itself too far-fetched for modern tastes' (Week 21), while some complaints were received 'that Sherlock Holmes's pipe was straight instead of the traditional bowl shape' (ibid). In fact, this was one of the markers of authenticity for which the production was otherwise being praised, another viewer commenting: 'I think it was presented as Conan Doyle himself would have liked' (ibid).

This near-universal enthusiasm for 'authentically' adapted Holmes could be read as a reaction against the perceived liberties taken with Doyle's texts in previous film and television versions, while the minority negative reaction can be ascribed to those who were *only* familiar with the less faithful screen adaptations, rather than the original source material. Although, in the US, Sheldon Reynolds' *Sherlock Holmes* (NBC, 1954-55) had arguably kept faith with the early books by presenting the first meeting between a comparatively youthful Holmes (Ronald Howard) and Watson (H. Marion Crawford), only a handful of the 39 half-hour episodes were actually based on Doyle's tales.¹⁷ This series was not shown in Britain at the time, and the fact that it was approved by the estate again highlights their inconsistency of approach, indicating that, while any Holmes intended for purely British consumption was obliged to remain faithful, overseas productions were largely free to do as they wished. Prior to this, grudging permission had been granted for the Universal film series of the 1940s, in which Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce's Holmes and Watson were (initially) repurposed as WWII-

era agents, on the understanding that a certain number be based on Doyle's tales (Leitch 213). This stipulation was, however, less than rigorously applied, and compared to the Universal films "The Speckled Band" was an exemplar of textual fidelity.

Following a BBC2 repeat, plans for a full series went ahead, R.G. Walford taking up the option on eight more stories in July (Walford 28 July). The new production retained Wilmer and Stock, along with producer Goddard. Giles Cooper penned four of the twelve episodes, but director Robin Midgley did not return. John Gould was appointed as story editor, though he soon withdrew through ill health, to be replaced by Anthony Read (Stern). As early as January 1964, Gould had written to Goddard, urging that

each episode should *open* with the crime, without bringing Holmes into it at all. This would be the nature of a 'tease' opening ... where an alternative opening might be found, or might be desirable, for one pilot programme, no other method would, I think, fit the series as a whole. I do not see the need, in any of the stories I have read, ever to use the flash-back technique, which would be necessary if we followed Doyle's method of telling the story. (original emphasis)

This approach, while reorganising Doyle's material in terms of chronology and space (the crime being seen on screen, rather than related to Holmes at Baker Street), in no way interfered with the essential mechanics of plot, and was utilized in the majority of episodes. Gould's successor Read continued to emphasize the need for fidelity, responding negatively in November 1964 to Duncan Ross's adaptation of 'The Sussex Vampire': 'our intention ... is to be as faithful as possible to Conan Doyle, using in each case the original story and all the original story, and obtaining the size we need by projection of this story from within itself'. Read was critical of the changes and additions made by Ross, a senior BBC staff writer who found the stricture of faithfulness somewhat limiting:

To me there is nothing terribly sacred about Sherlock Holmes. I only met Conan Doyle once and he hated Holmes as much as he did Oscar Slater.¹⁸ When one considers that he allowed William Gillett [sic] to do what he liked with his material as far back as the turn of the century ... and that now we have a musical¹⁹ in which Moriarty does a duet with Sherlock Holmes, it seemed to me that there was nothing particularly sacred about the task ahead. (Ross)

While pointing out that *Dr Finlay's Casebook* (BBC, 1962-71) had been an enormous success for the BBC, 'yet I cannot recall any part of any Cronin story ever having been used',²⁰ Ross conceded: 'certainly let us use Conan Doyle where possible ... I always hate going outside the original author'. However, Ross highlights a legitimate problem in terms of adapting Doyle for television; the fact that a simple re-ordering of events is sometimes not enough to create fifty minutes of compelling drama. His point regarding the seemingly contradictory attitude of the estate with regard to adaptations in different media is also well made. It is unclear why Adrian Conan Doyle imposed such exacting requirements on the televised Holmes, while the musical *Baker Street* and the Henry Lester-produced film *A Study in Terror* (1966) were simultaneously taking substantial liberties with his father's characters. Nevertheless, 'The Sussex Vampire' was quietly dropped from the schedule.

The mantra of fidelity was reproduced in a promotional document entitled *Sherlock Holmes: Critical Selling Points*, circulated in early 1965: 'It is being presented absolutely straight, as strong, meaty drama. The accent is on excitement and suspense, making full use of Doyle's gift for creating horror. It is aiming at complete accuracy to the period and to the original stories, and not to any conventional impressions of the characters and their surroundings'. The emphasis on 'straight' adaptation is presumably designed to distance the series from the humour introduced in the Fox and Universal films via Nigel Bruce's buffoonish Watson, one of the most contentious elements in the

Holmes *oeuvre*. Perhaps with Bruce in mind, the document states that ‘being faithful to the original stories may cause some surprises. The characters have often been disastrously parodied in the past’. Tom Steward’s assertion that the lead actors were the sole Holmes enthusiasts on the production is also contradicted: ‘Douglas Wilmer and Nigel Stock are life-long readers of Sir Arthur, as also is the producer, David Goddard’. Goddard is then quoted displaying his knowledge of Holmesiana, explaining the non-canoncity of the deerstalker and calabash, and highlighting the fact that, ‘above all, Sherlock Holmes was *not* an old man. He was agile, active, and although thin was very strong – able to straighten a bent steel poker with ease’ (original emphasis). Goddard also states that Dr Watson had been poorly served by previous film characterisations: ‘Nigel Stock, in a warm, subtle performance, restores Watson to his true worth’.

Goddard’s words seemed tailored to satisfy Holmes purists, and thereby the estate: ‘We are trying not to offend the fanatical enthusiasts ... But although we have consulted the “experts” we do not want to use secondhand impressions. We have gone right back to the original material for our references’. Nevertheless, Douglas Wilmer subsequently claimed that it was he and co-star Stock who kept the series on the straight and narrow:

There was one script, for “The Red-Headed League”, which was given to me only ten days before we were due to start rehearsing it ... I read the script and couldn’t believe my eyes. There were fourteen characters, all of them seeming to have been introduced from Damon Runyan, that were not mentioned in the Canon at all. The story started in a mews flat with the banker, Merryweather, in bed with his mistress. The script called for saucy pictures on the walls, and a sort of comic act with policemen climbing in and out of windows ... I suggested that the script editor should simply take a cake slice to the original text, lift out all the required dialogue, and there would be the script. And that is what they did. (quoted in Weller 1990: 4-5)

It should be borne in mind that Wilmer's comments, made many years after the event, were delivered to the highly appreciative Sherlock Holmes Society in the equivalent of a public performance, and may therefore contain an element of exaggeration for the purpose of entertainment. The BBC files contain no such version of "The Red-Headed League", the extant camera script being virtually identical to the transmitted version, which is reasonably faithful to Doyle's tale.

Whatever the basis of Wilmer's reminiscences, David Goddard was clearly at pains to remain in good odour with the estate. However, when a brief biography of Sir Arthur that had been prepared for promotional purposes was subjected to Adrian's scrutiny, he insisted on adding several paragraphs which expanded upon his father's early life. For Goddard, this was one demand too many:

We feel very strongly that although the views expressed ... are of great interest to the scholar, they could be actively detrimental to the impact and effectiveness of the piece for the popular press ... The result could well be to alienate their interest and reduce the amount of coverage which we obtain. (Goddard)

Doyle's correction of errors²¹ were carried out, however, and Goddard also amended the statement that 'This is the first time that Sherlock Holmes has been produced as a television series in this country'. The 1951 programmes had clearly not registered with Goddard, in spite of marked similarities in aims and approach.

Despite the best efforts of the production team, the 1965 series of *Sherlock Holmes* did not enjoy the healthiest of starts, 'The Illustrious Client' receiving 'strong and unanimous' criticism from the BBC Board of Management (Adam 22 Feb.). Director General Hugh Carleton Greene was particularly critical of the way 'in which the story had been altered as compared with the faithfulness of the [sic] Speckled Band'

(quoted in Adam 22 Feb.). The televised version of 'The Illustrious Client' indeed features a greater degree of 'opening up', with scenes added to depict the relationship between the depraved Baron Gruner (Peter Wyngarde) and his besotted fiancée Violet de Mervile (Jennie Linden). These do not, however, depart from the facts stated in Doyle's original story, and Giles Cooper's other changes are of the type consistent with transferring the written word to television, e.g. Holmes' first encounter with Gruner being dramatized, rather than subsequently reported to Watson.

The Board were not alone in their opinion, many viewers finding the episode

sadly disappointing. In their opinion, the story ... was 'tame', incredibly slow and uneventful in action, and sadly lacking in tension and excitement ... the piece had captured the spirit and climate of the time to remarkable degree, but there had been little or no scope in this rather naïve story for Holmes to demonstrate his much vaunted powers of deduction and analysis. (*Audience Research Report Week 8*)

Other pejorative terms employed included 'melodramatic' and 'period piece', yet praise was reserved for Douglas Wilmer, who was described as being 'Holmes to the life' (ibid). However, the initial Reaction Index of 59 had risen to an impressive 67 by the closing episode, with an average series score of 63 (*Audience Research Report Week 19*). Press reaction proved mixed, *Universe* pondering 'Is it merely that Victorian melodrama doesn't come across well today?', while *The Observer's* Maurice Richardson wrote that

[although] the production isn't quite as distinguished as one might have hoped ... dress is correct. Holmes's frock-coat and collar with the bow-tie ends tucked under closely follows the Paget illustrations. Douglas Wilmer's Holmes is a quite adequate likeness though not bony enough in the face to be ideal. His performance is intelligent and has plenty of that 'gravitas' which was so important an element in the myth of Holmes as a national father figure.

Clearly, perceived fidelity to Conan Doyle's originals was dividing opinion, and the programme's equivocal success meant that a second series was not immediately commissioned. When it returned to production in May 1968, numerous personnel changes had taken place. Producer David Goddard had left the BBC in 1965, and was replaced by William Sterling. Although previous story editors John Gould and Anthony Read returned to pen some episodes, script editing (as the job was now known) was handled by John Barber and Donald Tosh. The most significant change, however, was the replacement of Douglas Wilmer with Peter Cushing. Although Wilmer's correspondence has not been retained in the files, he later explained his departure as being due to the proposed reduction in timetable from a fortnight to ten days per episode: 'It had been said that I turned down the second series, but in fact the BBC turned me down because I said that I just could not do the stories in that time scale' (Wilmer, quoted in Weller 4).

Estate interference in the 1968 series proved comparatively minimal, Henry Lester being more concerned with re-negotiating the US and Canadian rights. However, the title change to *Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes* indicates a continuing desire to emphasise fidelity. Like Wilmer, Cushing was averse to altering Doyle's text,²² though the results were by now achieving increasingly mixed reactions. While viewing figures were high, audience research for the opening episode, 'The Second Stain', included the comment that 'this type of fiction was ... as dead as the dodo' (*Audience Research Report Week 37*), and 'The Musgrave Ritual' was similarly found to be 'far-fetched and melodramatic', 'thin and obvious', or at best 'reasonably entertaining' (*Audience Research Report Week 46*). As these are among the ten Cushing episodes missing from the archive²³ it is difficult to assess their merits, but the

remaining six, which include ‘The Hound of the Baskervilles’ and ‘A Study in Scarlet’, demonstrate varying degrees of fidelity. While the former is a reasonably straightforward adaptation (particularly when compared with the 1959 Hammer movie, also starring Cushing), the latter understandably removes Holmes’ and Watson’s first meeting, in addition to much of Jefferson Hope’s backstory, a major part of the original novel. There is no record of the estate objecting to this attenuation, however, and Reaction Indexes between 58 and 71 (*Audience Research Report* Week 46) meant that plans were eventually floated for a third series, leading to a fresh round of rights negotiations.

In June 1969 Doyle suggested that the BBC adapt certain of the stories from *The Exploits of Sherlock Holmes* for television (Walford 19 June). R.G. Walford raised this with Head of Television Series Drama, Andrew Osborn (the BBC’s original Holmes in *For the Children*), who expressed interest ‘provided that he would give us permission to write original scripts based on the characters created by his father’ (4 July). Osborn stated, however, that he would not be interested in a series of stories tied entirely to *The Exploits* (*ibid*). This can be read as a practical response to the increasingly negative reception afforded the ‘faithful’ Conan Doyle adaptations. Walford suggested to Osborn that the BBC ‘might mount a series based partly on *The Exploits* and partly on new stories’ (29 July). Osborn, while pointing out that there was not sufficient material in *The Exploits* to sustain the twenty-six episodes he had in mind, conceded that ‘we would certainly be willing to dramatize those stories ... which we considered suitable’ (4 Aug.). Adrian flatly refused to allow the BBC to create their own stories, but was prepared to consider a series comprising nine tales from *The Exploits* and four of his father’s originals (Walford 14 Aug.). In late October Walford reported that Doyle was

‘delighted’ (23 Oct.) with the BBC’s proposal along these lines. However, by the end of the month Osborn had back-tracked, stating that ‘bedevilment to our scheduling’ meant ‘we have to be thinking of some considerable time ahead for the possible scheduling of this project’ (28 Oct.). This is this last communication relating to the project, and the death of Adrian Conan Doyle the following year seems definitively to have laid it to rest.

CONCLUSION

The story of the BBC’s Sherlock Holmes series illustrates various points with regard to adapting the canon. The essential unworkability of certain stories meant that only a limited number could effectively be translated to television without ‘taking liberties’ with the text. Doyle’s tales are, with the notable exception of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, seldom whodunits, being more concerned with the how, why or even what of the mystery; Doyle was always quick to point out that, in many stories, no illegal action had in fact been perpetrated. This does not, however, necessarily make for gripping screen drama, a fact highlighted by the Rathbone films’ determined shoehorning of Holmes and Watson into non-canonical whodunit territory, even while claiming Doyle’s work as source material. The negative reception afforded the 1968 series indicates the diminishing number of Holmes stories suitable for adaptation, a difficulty also encountered by Granada, which latterly adopted a somewhat inconsistent approach to the canon. Both original series producer Michael Cox (185-9) and star Jeremy Brett lamented the insertion of new plotlines and characters when ‘The Adventure of the Noble Bachelor’ and ‘The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire’ were adapted and extended into two-hour dramas, Brett dismissing the latter as ‘pretend Doyle’ (Davies 152). The BBC’s desire to create original stories indicates their

awareness that many viewers were ignorant of what comprised canon Doyle, possibly due to the fact that so many earlier screen versions had varied in fidelity. This situation was largely due to the estate's unpredictable attitude, their granting of comparatively free reign in the US starkly contrasting with the strictures imposed upon the BBC. Latterly, however, the insistence on works only by Sir Arthur being adapted seems to have wavered once Adrian glimpsed the chance of seeing his own stories utilised by the Corporation – despite the fact that less than half his father's Holmes tales²⁴ had by this time been adapted. The power wielded by Doyle's heirs – and the inconsistency with which it was applied – can therefore be seen ultimately to have worked to the detriment of Holmes' BBC appearances, rather than their benefit.

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¹ *Sherlock Holmes Baffled* (1900).

² The deerstalker and cape can be traced to artist Sidney Paget, who provided illustrations for Conan Doyle's stories in *The Strand Magazine* from *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892) until *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* (1905). The deerstalker appears for the first time in 'The Adventure of Silver Blaze'. As Leitch notes, the calabash pipe was contributed by William Gillette in his play *Sherlock Holmes* (1899), along with the line, 'Elementary, my dear Watson'.

³ Interestingly, an illustration by Doyle's father Charles for the initial novel publication of *A Study in Scarlet* (1888) shows Holmes wearing a beard and moustache.

⁴ 'The Field Bazaar' (1896), and 'How Watson Learned the Trick' (1924).

⁵ *Baker Street* made its Broadway debut in 1965, and featured material from various Doyle stories, most prominently 'A Scandal in Bohemia'.

⁶ Although *Sherlock Holmes* (NBC, 1954-55) included some episodes based on Doyle's stories, the majority were original teleplays not deriving from his work.

⁷ *A Study in Terror* (1966); *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* (1970); *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution* (1976).

⁸ Examples include the *Comedy Playhouse* entry ‘Elementary, My Dear Watson’ (BBC, 1973) and *The Strange Case of the End of Civilisation as We Know It* (ITV, 1977), both starring John Cleese.

⁹ Conan Doyle famously allowed William Gillette *carte blanche* when the latter requested permission to write a stage play based on various short stories.

¹⁰ Although the main commonality between these programmes was Nigel Stock’s continuation as Dr Watson, BBC paperwork regards them as being the same series.

¹¹ *For the Children: The Adventure of the Mazarin Stone* (BBC, 1951); *Classics Dark and Dangerous: Silver Blaze* (ITV, 1977); a serialisation of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (BBC, 1982); and a feature-length version of the latter (BBC, 2002).

¹² This was not a world first, *The Three Garridebs* having been broadcast by NBC in November 1937. ‘The Adventure of the Speckled Band’ was subsequently transmitted as part of CBS’s *Your Show Time* in March 1949.

¹³ Doyle disliked the Stoll silent movies’ updating of Holmes to the 1920s (Lancelyn Green 312). The first ‘period’ screen Holmes was 20th Century Fox’s *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1939).

¹⁴ ‘His Last Bow’, in which Watson makes a late appearance, is written in the third person, while Holmes narrates ‘The Adventure of the Blanched Soldier’ and ‘The Lion’s Mane’, neither of which features Watson. In addition, Watson merely relates adventures as told by Holmes in ‘The Gloria Scott’ and ‘The Musgrave Ritual’.

¹⁵ Given Adrian's embargo on overseas screenings, the episodes were probably not telerecorded.

¹⁶ Detectives featured included Ngaio Marsh's Inspector Alleyn and G.K. Chesterton's Father Brown. There were two other 'spin-off' series: *Cluff* (BBC, 1965) and *Thorndyke* (BBC, 1964).

¹⁷ 'The Red-Headed League' is the most straightforward of these, although 'The Case of the French Interpreter' clearly derives from 'The Greek Interpreter', and 'The Case of the Shoeless Engineer' from 'The Engineer's Thumb'.

¹⁸ A German man wrongly convicted of murder, whose case Conan Doyle publicly championed.

¹⁹ *Baker Street*.

²⁰ This would have been problematic, as the literary source was a single novella, *Country Doctor* (1935). Cronin did, however, write for the television series.

²¹ *A Study in Scarlet* having been written in 1886, not 1882.

²² Donald Tosh in fact used Cushing's insistence on 'sticking to Doyle' against him when the actor wished to alter the conclusion to 'The Solitary Cyclist' (quoted in Barnes 249).

²³ By contrast, only 2 of Douglas Wilmer's 12 episodes are missing or incomplete.

²⁴ Twenty-six of the fifty-six short stories, plus two of the four novels.