DE GRUYTER
OPEN

DOI: 10.1515/genst-2017-0003

GENDER TROUBLE IN CONAN DOYLE'S "THE ADVENTURE OF THE SOLITARY CYCLIST"

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***Abstract:** Although the Victorian period was a time when the sexes were assigned distinct and complementary roles, these rigid gender-role divisions between the two sexes were beginning to dissolve as the nineteenth century was drawing to its close. Among the various factors that contributed to bringing the two genders closer was the cycling boom of the 1890s, and the first-wave feminists embraced the bicycle as a freedom machine and symbol of emancipation. Despite the fact, though, that cycling functioned at first as a gender equaliser, , it eventually segregated the sexes, as social norms promoted the idea of gendered cycling and enforced a model of domesticated or feminised cycling for women. This essay aims to explore how Arthur Conan Doyle's 1895 story "The Adventure of the Solitary Cyclist" reflects this complicated impact that cycling had on gender segregation and the possibilities it offered for gender fusion as well as the alternative expressions of sexuality it enabled.*

***Key-words:** Arthur Conan Doyle, closeted desire, cycling boom, fin-de-siècle, New Woman.*

Gender and Cycling in the Fin-de-Siècle

As is well known, throughout the nineteenth century England was expanding into a territorial, economic and industrial power that possessed almost a quarter of the earth and controlled world markets and banks. As a thriving nation it was obsessed with constancy and the wish to preserve its status quo of supremacy all over the world. Consequently, Britain was very sensitive to any changes in the structure of society and its institutions; class and gender hierarchies were safeguarded and the need to increase the nation's population became more pressing than ever before. Marriage and family were perceived as pillars of morality and state order, and the two genders were assigned disparate and unwavering roles: while men were called to take an active part in public events, women were restricted to the domestic sphere. "The sexes," Virginia Woolf writes in her novel *Orlando*, "drew further and further apart", and what guaranteed the building of a world empire was, she claims half-jokingly half-seriously, the fact that "the life of the average woman was a succession of childbirths" (1998:219).

By the late Victorian period, however, this highly stratified class and gender system had become seriously impaired. Britain's losses in actual territory that eventually led to the decline of the British Empire ran parallel with social turmoil at home caused partially by the Reform Act of 1867 (which granted a small part of the male working class population the right to vote for the first time), and a few years later by the rise of women's suffrage. Meanwhile, Queen Victoria, the emblem of domestic propriety and moral responsibility, was unsettled when scandals marred the name of Prince Edward, one of her nine children and heir to the throne. The late Victorians were, on the one hand, caught up in the swirl of an era that was coming to an end and that insisted on drawing men and women further and

further apart by prescribing steadfast gender roles to them. On the other hand, they invented ways of escaping their restrictive past and headed towards more progressive modes of thinking which in many ways anticipated late twentieth-century perceptions of gender and sex identities.

This resistance to Victorian ideals led to the first feminist rebellion and the birth of the image of the New Woman that initiated debates on such issues as women's education, suffrage, and autonomy. The New Women challenged the traditional patriarchal society and the view that marriage and motherhood were the most suitable occupations for women. They tried to redefine the relations between the sexes, called for honesty in sexual matters, supported the professional aspirations of women, and increased mobility away from the family. The image of the New Woman became firmly associated with the safety bicycle, which was introduced by Kemp Stanley in 1884 and improved with the addition of John Dunlop's pneumatic tyres in 1887. The safety bicycle, though still heavy, was much easier to ride than the high-wheeler or "pennyfarthing" or the more expensive tricycle and, by 1888, was women's basic means of transportation. Cycling allowed women freedom of physical movement, demanded a new clothing style, and was directly associated with women's struggle for suffrage. As a number of critics have shown, the bicycle was embraced by the first wave feminists as an emancipatory tool that granted women the freedom to challenge and defy established notions of gender. Both Sue Macy in her extended study entitled *Wheels of Change: How Women Rode the Bicycle to Freedom (With a Few Flat Tires Along the Way)* (2011), and Lena Wanggren in her article "The 'Freedom Machine' The New Woman and the Bicycle" (2015), stress the crucial role that bicycling played in shaping new gender roles for late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century women. As Wanggren writes,

The American suffragist Susan B. Anthony, who often travelled to and published in Britain, famously stated in 1896 that bicycling had done “more to emancipate women than anything else in the world.” Another well-known American suffrage campaigner, Frances Willard, learning to ride the bicycle in Britain, saw in the bicycle an opening for women’s rights activists. (2015:125)

Soon, bicycles became the emblem of the New Woman, the “mannish amazon,” a term which Lyn Pykett uses in her Foreword to a collection of essays on *The New Woman in Fiction and Fact: Fin-de-Siècle Feminisms* (2002: xii), that was challenging canonical perceptions of masculinities and femininities in the *fin-de-siècle*.

Conan Doyle’s Detective Fiction

Issues of gender, class, and the Empire are reflected in Arthur Conan Doyle’s detective fiction, which has been widely read as a genre that promotes the dominant Victorian ideologies. Indeed, to the extent that Conan Doyle was as an archetypal white male author, he created a character who was an advocate of imperialist and patriarchal values. The most prominent readings of Conan Doyle in the 1980s and 1990s, as John A. Hodgson has pointed out, conclude that he was a straightforward supporter of the Empire, and an advocate of Victorian ethics and manners (2010:392-93). In terms of gender, Conan Doyle seems to subscribe to Victorian stereotypical depictions of active, intellectual, and strong men as opposed to passive, instinctive, and weak women. His renowned detective, Sherlock Holmes, is the epitome of scientific thinking, the apex of the masculine rationalist thinker model, who is capable of deciphering the most insoluble

mystery and providing a logical explanation for it. Conan Doyle's female characters, on the other hand, are close to conventional middle-class Victorian notions of women as defenceless creatures in need of protection from external threats.

More recent criticism, however, has made an effort to recognise the complexity of Conan Doyle's stories and trace not only the elements that reflect Victorian standards, but also those that question and criticise them. Conan Doyle himself was after all not always consistent in his views on Empire politics or gender roles; as Hodgson argues: "he was an outspoken defender of British actions in the Boer War but also a supporter of Irish Home Rule; or again, that he was an opponent of women's suffrage but also a supporter of divorce law reform" (2010:393). The Sherlock Holmes stories, likewise, offer narrative spaces upon which the fixity of Victorian principles is defied and gendered subjectivity is complicated, as Leslie Haynsworth contends in his article "Sensational Adventures: Sherlock Holmes and his Generic Past" (2001:463). Seen in that light, the large number of silent and mysterious women who populate Conan Doyle's stories can be interpreted as oppositional voices that disrupt the hierarchies of the society he is referring to. According to Catherine Belsey, these figures, which can be neither ignored nor explained, subvert Holmes' model of exactitude and meticulousness. Their muted sexuality defies scientific explanation or categorisation; it "transgresses the values of the texts, and in doing so throws into relief the poverty of the contemporary concept of science" (Belsey 2001:95).

"The Solitary Cyclist"

Conan Doyle's "The Adventure of the Solitary Cyclist," one of his popular detective stories, was first published in 1904 and is one of 13 stories in the cycle collected as *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*. In my discussion of the story, I will focus on how the silencing of the female voice, as well as cycling, introduce new data that render Holmes' case more complicated and less easy to classify. Plotwise, the story endorses Victorian gender stereotypes, as it is based on the "helpless-woman-rescued-by-clever-and-strong-man" motif. The central heroine of the story, Miss Violet Smith, arrives at Baker Street late in the evening of the 23rd of April 1895, determined to tell her story to the famous detective and plead for help. This young and beautiful woman, according to Dr Watson's narration, has fallen prey to a group of men (Mr. Carruthers, Mr. Woodley, and Mr. Williamson) who aim to set a trap for her in order to rob her of the large fortune she will inherit after her uncle's death. Poor as she is after the death of her father, and having being told that her uncle has died in poverty in South Africa, Violet accepts a post as live-in music teacher that she is offered by Mr. Carruthers. They come to the agreement that she will stay in Surrey with this widower and his daughter during the week and return to her mother in London at weekends. What has alarmed Violet is the fact that on her six-mile bicycle ride from Mr. Carruthers' house to the train station, she is always followed by a mysterious cyclist whom she is not able to recognise and who contrives to vanish without a trace every time she attempts to approach him. Violet erroneously suspects that the cyclist is in some way associated with the boorish Mr. Woodley, who has made crude sexual advances to her and insists on marrying her, but it is revealed at the end that the cyclist is no other than Mr. Carruthers in disguise. Although the two men had initially plotted to trick Violet into marriage in order to lay hands

on the fortune she would be left, the refined Mr. Carruthers has truly fallen in love with her and wishes to guard her on her solitary rides. The mystery is solved when during Violet's last trip to the station (she has resigned her post after declining Mr. Carruthers' marriage proposal), Holmes and Watson arrive just in time to save her from her two kidnappers, Woodley, who has forced Violet into marriage, and Williamson, the unfrocked clergyman who performed the fake ceremony.

In Conan Doyle's narrative, order appears to be restored at the end at all levels: the intrigue is exposed, the two villains are convicted for abduction and assault, and Miss Smith is safely steered into marriage with "her" Cyril Morton, an electrical engineer from Coventry, who is very conveniently transferred to Violet's proximity in Westminster. Violet is, finally, settled for good in central London and need not traverse the country roads any more on her bicycle. As one critic has concluded, "the frightened Violet will probably not go cycling on her own again soon" (Wanggren 2015:127). There is something about the closure of this story, however, and the gagged Violet in the final scene that calls for further attention. If "a forced marriage is no marriage," as Holmes reminds Woodley and Williamson when their felony is discovered, one might wonder whether Violet's marriage with Cyril at the end is not another *forced marriage*, in the sense that Violet's desire for him reflects her playing the part of the "graceful" and "queenly" young lady Watson's narration aspires to promote. Isn't this after all the role Victorian society would expect her to play? If Conan Doyle's detective narratives are supposed to assign proper roles to their characters and re-establish order through positivist thought, or to function, in Rosemary Jann's words, as "antidotes" in a late Victorian society agitated by scandals such as the threatening sexuality of the New

Woman (1990:705), Miss Smith's desire for Cyril fits perfectly well into the ideal heteronormal Victorian marriage pattern.

On the whole, Violet must indeed have been a very reassuring character for prudent Victorian readers, as she does her best to make sure she subscribes to the established order of things. In her first reference to Cyril, she seems to be so skilfully performing the part of the infatuated young girl that she surprises even herself. "Mr. Woodley," she reports to Holmes and Watson,

[...] seemed to me to be the most odious person. He was for ever making eyes at me—coarse, puffy-faced, red-moustached young man, with his hair plastered down on each side of his forehead. I thought that he was perfectly hateful—and I was sure that Cyril would not wish me to know such a person."

"Oh, Cyril is his name!" said Holmes, smiling.

The young lady blushed and laughed.

"Yes, Mr. Holmes; Cyril Morton, an electrical engineer, and we hope to be married at the end of the summer. Dear me, how *did* I get talking about him? What I wished to say was that Mr. Woodley was perfectly odious, but that Mr. Carruthers, who was a much older man, was more agreeable. (emphasis in the original)

Violet's question ("how *did* I get talking about him?") makes evident not only that her fiancé's wishes prompt hers ("Cyril would not wish me to know such a person"), but also that she discovers in astonishment that her speech is beyond her control. What she could be asking here is: "How did I get talking about what *Cyril* would want me to do, while I was talking about something that displeased *me*?" or: "Is my mind so obsessed with Cyril that he is motivating all my thoughts and actions?" or, at a metafictional level,

“Is it my destiny as a female character created through the prism of male-centredness to always depend on a male person’s perspective?” Read in this light, Violet’s question implies she has been unconsciously pushed into the role of a woman who has totally surrendered to the desires of her future husband and can be interpreted as a feminist remark (to the extent that she has become self-aware of the role she is called to perform) about women’s compulsory entry into heteronormativity and married life.

Isn’t this claim pushing things a bit too far, though? What else could Miss Smith possibly wish for but the bliss of married life? It would have been easy to provide the answer to this question, had she been given a voice of her own at the end of the story. But, despite the fact that she is a very fluent speaker at the beginning, presenting her case with great “determination,” “clearness and composure,” all we hear at the end is her “shrill scream vibrat[ing] with a frenzy of horror” and “end[ing] silently on its highest note with a choke and a gurgle,” as she is “drooping and faint [with] a handkerchief round her mouth.” Deprived of speech, Miss Smith passively goes through a number of roles to please the male characters of the story, as follows: Woodley wants her to be his wife, Carruthers wants her to be Woodley’s widow, while Holmes and Watson want her to be Cyril’s wife, and, to the sensible reader’s relief, this is the scenario that prevails at the end. What if her muffled screams, though, reflect Miss Smith’s aversion to any of these parts she is called to play, even that of being reduced to being Cyril’s happy and voiceless wife?

There is one important detail about Violet Smith’s character that seems to be evidence for the latter view. She is an “ardent cyclist.” So energetic and competent that her depiction by Sydney Paget, the famous Victorian illustrator and best known for his illustrations of Conan Doyle’s

stories in *The Strand Magazine*, does not really do her justice. With her long frock, delicate appearance, and feminine elegance, Paget's Violet has retained only the gracefulness of Conan Doyle's heroine, as if Paget had ignored the fact that she is a swift and agile cyclist who lays traps for her pursuer, surprises him with her clever, supple moves, and even engages him in a stimulating game of hide-and-seek. This is how Watson describes her, as he watches Carruthers who is watching Violet and then following her:

In all the broad landscape those were the only moving figures, the graceful girl sitting very straight upon her machine, and the man behind her bending low over his handle-bar, with a curiously furtive suggestion in every movement. She looked back at him and slowed her pace. He slowed also. She stopped. He at once stopped too, keeping two hundred yards behind her. Her next movement was as unexpected as it was spirited. She suddenly whisked her wheels round and dashed straight at him! He was as quick as she, however, and darted off in desperate flight. Presently she came back up the road again, her head haughtily in the air, not deigning to take any further notice of her silent attendant.

The image of this feisty cyclist bears little resemblance to that of the refined, fragile almost, lady in the picture. And yet it was Conan Doyle who had specifically requested that Paget be the illustrator of *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* in 1903-04, as he was so pleased with his work for *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* in 1893 and for *The Hound of the Baskervilles* in 1901. Why should he have been satisfied, though, with an inaccurate representation of his character? Was he perhaps anxious to compensate for the "athletic" side of Miss Smith as shown in her daring to challenge an unknown man in her brave pursuit of him?

Paget's illustrations of Conan Doyle's stories were so influential that they inspired fictional, cinematic and dramatic interpretations of Holmes, which were sometimes based on details that were *his* inventions rather than the author's. Holmes' deerstalker cap and Inverness cape, for instance, were first introduced by Paget and soon adopted by most Holmes impersonators in the cinematic adaptations of Conan Doyle's stories. What I would like to suggest here is that Paget's depiction of Violet in her elegant dress, pelerine collar, pagoda sleeves falling loosely, and Edwardian flat cap, contains all these added extras, which are misleading in the sense that they highlight only one aspect of her character, her domesticated self that Holmes, Watson, and Conan Doyle evidently, wished to promote. In other words, although Conan Doyle adopts the image of the New Woman, who is free to mount her bike and move about at her own will, he wants to make sure she won't go very far.

Not all women cyclists, after all, were intimidating gender benders. For even if the bicycle was a "great leveller" of class and gender differences, there was still room for disseminating distinctions, as Phillip Gordon Mackintosh and Glen Norcliffe have shown in their insightful study of gender and cycling in the late nineteenth century. *What* one rode, for instance, or *how* one rode played a decisive role in how subversive or emancipating the act of riding was. Let us remember that it was not the masculine high-wheeler that became the "freedom machine" for women, but John Kemp Stanley's low-wheel safety bicycle. There were gender variations on bicycles as there were variations on the act of riding itself, and that resulted in multiple sub-species of what sociologists of cycling have called "*homo bicyclistus*" (Mackintosh and Norcliffe 2007:157). As far as men were concerned, there were disciplined and courteous cyclists in clubs

and groups and scorching cyclists who transformed riding into an act of masculine spectacle. And for women, there were those who insisted on rational dress and knickerbockers and others who practised a more feminised style of riding.

The more independent women cyclists stuck to the bloomers, those baggy knee-length trousers which were first associated with women's freedom of movement and emancipation in the 1850s and adopted by seminal advocates of feminist reform in the States, for example Amelia Bloomer and Lucy Stone. The bloomers reappeared in an updated version during the bicycle craze of the 1890s and soon became the standard "bicycle dress" for women. Violet's "athletic," according to Holmes, physique would have fitted better into them than into Paget's neat frock, but this would obviously have marred the feminine ideal that Conan Doyle sanctioned. Female cyclists in bloomers were often the subject of ridicule and harsh criticism in the press of the time, as such women supposedly set their health and reproductive potential at risk, threatened to subvert the order of family life, and sometimes degenerated into aggressive, uncontrollable viragos. Moreover, the bloomers' affinity to the Turkish trousers, worn by either sex, disconcerted strong defenders of the Empire, who conflated the Orient and its modes with licentiousness and promiscuity.

There was indeed great concern in the 1890s (and beyond) that bicycle riding might be sexually stimulating for women: bestriding a saddle combined with the motion required to propel a bicycle was thought to lead to dangerous stimulation. Early in the story, the detail related about Miss Smith's roughened shoe sole is a covert remark about the pleasure she derives from riding her bicycle. Holmes very suggestively associates

Violet's healthy and energetic body with cycling, while she is caught by surprise at the fact that her secret passion is revealed:

"[...] it cannot be your health that troubles you," said Holmes, as his keen eyes darted over her; "so ardent a bicyclist must be full of energy."

She glanced down in surprise at her own feet, and I observed (Watson notes) the slight roughening of the side of her sole caused by the friction of the edge of the pedal.

Violet's bicycle is definitely not the tool for women's domestication that the American educator and women's suffragist, Frances Willard, had imagined it to be. In her enthusiastic recount of how she learned to ride the bicycle in Britain, *A Wheel Within a Wheel*, published in 1895, Willard puts forward the idea of the bicycle as a bourgeois "parlour on wheels," or "the prescribed site for and geography of moral tuition," as Mackintosh and Norcliffe put it (2007:172, 167). Her aim was to transform the bicycle into a great domesticator in her effort to spread the notion of domesticity that prevailed both in Europe and in North America at the end of the century. In her bestseller, Willard presents cycling as a stylish, collective, ordered, and family-orientated activity, and urges bourgeois women to experience it as such:

We saw with satisfaction the great advantage in good fellowship and mutual understanding between men and women who take the road together, sharing its hardships and rejoicing in the poetry of motion through landscapes breathing nature's inexhaustible charm and skylscapes lifting the heart from what is to what shall be hereafter. (1895:40)

Cycling in Conan Doyle's story, however, is neither an aesthetic/spiritual experience, nor the emblem of companionship or the peacemaker of conjugal bonds. It is a solitary activity that yields feelings of heated excitement; it involves a furtive contact between the cyclist's body and the machine—feet on pedals, backside on saddle, hands on handle bar—and inspires the scopophilic male gaze. Violet's little trips to the station exhilarate Carruthers, who prefers to follow her on his bicycle rather than hire a coach to protect her; it is very odd, as Holmes observes, that he "pays double the market price for a governess, but does not keep a horse although six miles from the station." Their private encounters in the isolated rural countryside are, after all, loaded with sexual innuendos: Violet's frisky moves, her unexpected turns, and the traps she lays for him undoubtedly make the pursuit all the more spicy.

Moreover, Carruthers' disguise, his dark suit, cloth cap, and short dark beard, his act of hiding his face, or bending low over the handlebars while following Violet, allude to a stealthy desire and reflect the fin-de-siècle crisis in masculinity. Sociologists of gender have argued that in post-agrarian industrial societies white male power diminished, as, in the new capitalist order, bourgeois men were engaged in work and capitalist production and women had the oversight of the family and domestic economy (Mackintosh and Norcliffe 2007:155). Such privileging of women increased feminisation and domestication and prompted a crisis in masculinity. In their efforts to counter fears about the rise of effeminacy and corporeal softness, Victorian men engaged in sports, athleticism and high wheeling. It is not accidental that Holmes is quite proficient in the "good old British sport of boxing." He feels elevated when after a stormy confrontation with Mr. Woodley in a country pub, he returns to Baker Street

with “a cut lip, a discoloured lump upon his forehead, and a general air of dissipation.” “I get so little active exercise,” he boasts to Watson, “that it is always a treat.” “Immensely tickled by his own adventures,” he recounts how the verbal fight with Woodley led to a “delicious” match after which his opponent was sent home in a cart. Holmes’s masculinity, in this case, combines both intellectual and physical excellence, and his aggressiveness, which is presented as self-defence, allows him to overpower and deride his antagonist. As Emelyne Godfrey has argued in her study of *Masculinity, Crime and Self-Defence in Victorian Literature*, an act of violence, when motivated by a man’s wish to protect himself was not only fully justified, but also reinforced the self-defender’s masculinity.

Despite the fact, however, that, through Holmes, Conan Doyle on the whole endorses the prevailing model of bourgeois Victorian masculinity, he also challenges it and reveals some of the inner conflicts embedded in it. Joseph A. Kestner’s extensive study, *Sherlock’s Men: Masculinity, Conan Doyle, and Cultural History*, argues convincingly that Conan Doyle problematises monolithic masculine ideals. In the story we have been examining, it is Mr. Carruthers who, when juxtaposed to Holmes’ irrefutable mental and manual force, complicates masculinity, despite the fact that he also seems to possess such qualities. He is witty enough to mislead both Violet and the famous detective, and he is also strong enough to knock Woodley down and cut his face open in defence of Miss Smith. Moreover, despite his age, he is a flying “racer,” albeit a solitary one who dare not reveal his identity or desire to the woman he loves. Carruthers prefers to follow Violet at a safe distance rather than hire a coach for her and is satisfied with the mere act of looking at her when he knows she is not willing to give him more. In his sincere confession to Holmes at the end,

Carruthers discloses a scopophilic and self-centred kind of desire doomed to remain closeted:

“...[I loved her, Mr. Holmes, [he confesses] and it is the only time that ever I knew what love was [...] I never once let her go past this house, where I knew these rascals were lurking, without following her on my bicycle just to see that she came to no harm. I kept my distance from her, and I wore a beard so that she should not recognise me, for she is a good and high-spirited girl, and she wouldn’t have stayed in my employment long if she had thought that I was following her about the country roads.”

“Why didn’t you tell her of her danger?” [Holmes asks.]

“Because then, again, she would have left me, and I couldn’t bear to face that. Even if she couldn’t love me it was a great deal to me just to see her dainty form about the house, and to hear the sound of her voice.”

“Well,” said [Watson], “you call that love, Mr. Carruthers, but I should call it selfishness.”

“Maybe the two things go together. Anyhow, I couldn’t let her go.”

If love and selfishness conflate, as Carruthers speculates, then the safety bicycle and the solitary rides that both Violet and Carruthers engage in most appropriately epitomise the self-reflexive love they seem to relish. Read in this light, Conan Doyle’s reference to the most popular means of transportation and recreation in the fin-de-siècle, the bicycle, alludes to the self-absorbed satisfaction that cycling offered, and mirror the gender fusion it initiated. The “solitary cyclist” is, after all, a unisex term, as it is used interchangeably for both a male and a female character in the story.

Conclusion

I have argued that although Conan Doyle’s story projects bourgeois, hegemonic femininities and masculinities, there are breaches and

contradictions in the narrative which shatter the illusion of monolithic gender identities. Violet's vigorous solitary rides, the friction mark on her sole, even her silenced voice at the end destabilise the domesticated model of the feminine cyclist which she is forced into and which Paget's illustrations promote. Moreover, the contemporary masculine ideal of a man possessing both mental and corporeal excellence, embodied by Holmes, the dominant male paradigm in Conan Doyle's story, is contested by Carruthers' solitary, scopophilic, and closeted desire. At the story's close, Violet is of course happily married and safely settled in London, but "her" Cyril is more of a ghost-like or Joker figure that hovers over Conan Doyle's text and never makes an entrance. Love and desire in "The Solitary Cyclist" are terms locked in isolated and hidden activities that can be performed interchangeably by either sex.

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