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Articles

(formerly Theory and Other Dangerous Things)

A Case of (Mistaken?) Identity: The Authorship Controversy Surrounding the Sherlock Holmes Canon

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Abstract: In recent Sherlockian studies one of the most intriguing questions deals with the issue of who the actual author is of the Sherlock Holmes canon. In the regular reference sources, ranging from the traditional forms like the Britannica to the modern means of electronic dictionaries or Internet encyclopedias like Wikipedia, Arthur Conan Doyle is regarded as the actual author of the canon. In Sherlockian studies the “true” identity of the author is addressed in subsequent articles that have appeared in the *Baker Street Journal*.

Introduction

In the history of literature there are cases where the authorships are under dispute. Shakespeare’s case has generated a large amount of theories trying to identify the true author behind the works with certain historical individuals. The works of the Bronte sisters at first were published under masculine names to hide the true authorship behind their literary works. In the history of literary works there are cases where other authors hide their true identity by using instead of their own names a *nom de plume* for different reasons. François-Marie Arouet (1694-1778) became better known as Voltaire to escape prosecution for his highly critical writings against established religion and political systems.

Now, with Conan Doyle another type of authorship controversy emerged. Simply put, Conan Doyle is viewed as the ghost author of Dr. Watson’s narrations within certain Sherlockian studies (Klinger, 2009, 2013).

When reading the canon from beginning to end the question that comes up naturally is the identity of the author. Who is the writer, or writers, of the canon? Sherlock Holmes repeatedly throughout the canon (MUSG, RESI, BRUC, BLANC) refer to Watson as his biographer, although he himself recorded merely a couple of cases (BLANC, LION). This means that Watson wrote except for these two the other 58 stories (Klinger, 2013,

Bode, J. (2014). A case of (mistaken?) identity: The authorship controversy surrounding the Sherlock Holmes canon. *OTB Forum*, 7(1), 7-13.

Vol. 1, p. xlvi). There are stories that follow a slightly modified process (STUD, VALL).

In this short monograph I would like to introduce some possible viewpoints with regard to the two main and recurrent characters in the canon. Also addressing the weak-points of identity studies published within the Baker Street Journal for establishing a new theory on the authorship of canon.

Literature Review

In general available reference sources on the subject of Conan Doyle, Sherlock Holmes, or John Watson (Herbert, 1999, pp. 124-125, 223-224, 491), the author of the Sherlock Holmes canon has been recognized as Arthur Conan Doyle. Redmond (2009, p. 49) summarises his thoughts on the subject as follows: “If Holmes is Arthur Conan Doyle’s mentor, Joseph Bell, surely Watson is Doyle himself.”

This shows that Redmond considers Holmes as well as Watson as fictional characters and it follows a line of thought that has been accepted for a long period of time. To this viewpoint, another optional theory in the Sherlockian/Holmesian studies has been updated by Leslie Klinger in his Baker Street Journal (BSJ) article on John H. Watson (Klinger, 2013, pp. 36-45) with regard to the authorship issue of the canon. He bases his research on an actual correspondence between Conan Doyle and Watson. This correspondence is partially available in a separate volume published by the same journal (2009). Such a correspondence would automatically infer a correspondence between two contemporaneous persons at the time. At

present this particular 2009 article is out of print making it difficult to accept a most thought provoking theory, which would make Conan Doyle the ghost-writer of Watson. Klinger has stated that he is planning to compile his articles in a single volume (Klinger, personal communication, March 21, 2014). The correspondence I had with the Houghton Library in early June of 2014 confirms my initial doubts about the correspondence between Conan Doyle and Watson. Houghton library revealed that the correspondence is in fact a pastiche (Houghton library, personal communication, June 5, 2014) The suggestions I make hereafter should be considered as a basic requirements for authorship claims the Sherlock Holmes canon.

Optional possibilities of the identity of John H. Watson

In the previous section I introduced two possible identities of John H. Watson depending on what personal theory individual researchers embrace. Redmond suggests the more accepted viewpoint that Watson is a fictional character, while Klinger considers him to be a real historical person living in the same period of time as Conan Doyle. Linsenmeyer (1978) also describes Watson as such, in particular when he was in India according to the description of Sir Robert Baden-Powell. There is, actually, one more way of looking at Watson: He is based on a historical person. In that case, it is not correct to put him in the same category as a fictional character, since he is then a composite character and cannot be considered fully as a fictional creation. In summary, to simplify the complex issue the categories shown in Table 1 could be helpful for considering the following available material and other

Table 1. *Possible Identities of Dr. John H. Watson*

Identity	Specific Identity	Source
Watson is a historical person		
	Conan Doyle = ghost writer of Dr. Watson	Klinger (2013, pp. 36-45)
	Watson as “Hoghunter Sahib” [based on Sir Robert Baden-Powell remarks]	Linsenmeyer (1978, pp. 12-15)
Watson is based on a historical person		
	Watson is based on Conan Doyle, or his secretary, Major Woods.	Costello (1991, p. 49)
Watson is the fictional author		
	Watson is based on Conan Doyle’s creativity as a literary product	O’Brien (2013, p. 25)

Note. A classification of the state of present Watson studies with representative studies.

material the reader might find in further researches.

Discussion

At present the question on authorship of the canon is unresolved and might need further research. One direction which could support Klinger’s research and findings further would be whether independent sources confirm the existence of John H. Watson in history through school, university, and army records. As for the claim on the “true” authorship of the canon, this is an issue which needs to be confirmed through other means. Questions that come to mind include, if Watson is a real person why he never came forward with his own records or why Conan Doyle kept the correspondence with Watson completely private even later in life. If Watson is the “true” author of the canon, what would that say about Conan Doyle’s other writings. It is hard to believe that Conan Doyle would be satisfied of being the author only in name. Through perhaps forensic linguistics (Olsson, 2008) the “whole oeuvre” of Conan Doyle could be investigated whether there are discrepancies in style and personal touch between the Sherlock Holmes canon and the other literary products of Conan Doyle. Klinger (2009, p. 133) refers to a few possible candidates without actually being concerned with forensic linguistics himself. He states the following works as truly written by Conan Doyle: *The Tragedy of Korosko*, *The Exploits of Brigadier Gerard*, *Rodney Stone*, and *The Stark Munro Letters*.

Comparison canon with another Conan Doyle literary source

To actually do a valid forensic linguistic investigation, as mentioned above, it is necessary to work with the complete oeuvre and avoid looking at a singular case. But, as an example that gave to me the initial spark to consider the issue in this light came from the Jack Tracy edition of *Strange Studies from Life and Other Narratives* (1988). The book has been divided into two parts. It starts with three narratives on the subject of three actual (criminal) cases in the 19th century that appeared in the Strand magazine in 1901 (p. xvii), followed by two narratives published in different journals (p. 47) and two short monographs. One is on the history of duels in France from a legal standpoint, while the second one is on the application of spiritualism within the field of crime investigations. This section of the book contains material that was actually published before 1901. It seems the editor gave the Strand-publication a higher priority than the publications in the other journals, although the last monograph also appeared in the Strand magazine in 1920.

The editor introduces Arthur Conan Doyle as the author of many “tales” and “stories” (p. xiv), including Sherlock Holmes. The Watson authorship does not appear to be considered as such by this editor.

In one of the narratives of the 1988 studies, there is the following statement, which expresses a similar idea also present in one of the Sherlock Holmes adventures. From this as one out of possibly a multitude of cases in the Conan Doyle oeuvre forensic linguistic could assist to determine if there is validity to Klinger’s assertions.

In *The Bravo of Market-Drayton* (p. 49) the statement under consideration runs as follows:

The traveller who in the days of our grandfathers... was deeply impressed by the Arcadian simplicity of the peasants, and congratulated himself that innocence, long pushed out of the cities, could still find a refuge amid these peaceful scenes. Most likely he would have smiled incredulously had he been informed that neither in the dens of Whitechapel nor in the slums of

Birmingham was morality so lax or human life so cheap as in the fair region which he was admiring.

Not a literal equivalent is present in the Sherlock Holmes canon, but a similar way of juxtaposition is at work in the following statement from *The Adventure of the Copper Beeches* (Conan Doyle, 2007, p. 277).

You [Watson] look at these scattered houses and you are impressed by their beauty. I [Sherlock Holmes] look at them, and the only thought which comes to me is a feeling of their isolation, and of the impunity with which crime may be committed there.

This of course not enough to conclude either way the authorship, but if Sherlock Holmes is not Conan Doyle’s creation, it should show up that the stylistic idiosyncrasy between Conan Doyle and Watson are wide apart in the best case scenario. However, the practical problem is what can actually be considered as genuine writing by Conan Doyle, and what can be considered as genuine samples by Watson. From that point on forensic linguistics will be possible. Without this as a prerequisite any further forensic investigation will not be able to proceed further.

Additionally, in Klinger’s article it becomes clear that the correspondence were manually produced, however actually samples of these are not given as illustrative material in the text, or outside the text in appendixes, which could take away some of the doubt raised by the statement regarding the anonymous benefactor of the correspondence. There still are doubts due to other instances. In one case where the phraseology such as Watson’s praise for Conan Doyle’s White Company: “It is splendid stuff” (Klinger, 2009, p. 128). It sounds a tad to modern for a 19th century medical doctor.

Why would Watson use an address number (Klinger, 2009, p. 120) not existent at the time (Sinclair, 2009, pp. 50-60)? Granted that Watson perhaps wanted to hide the real address of the Baker Street dwellings of Holmes and Watson, it looks singular to use it in correspondence between two colleagues. It could, of course, have been used by Watson as private amusement between him and Conan Doyle. Without any reference to

supporting material it is not possible to deduce if their relation warranted such a light exchange manner within their correspondence. Actually, 221B was established much later, around 1930, by the extension and renumbering of Baker Street with Upper Baker Street (Sinclair, 2009, p. 53).

Forensic method for authorship comparison of the Sherlock Holmes canon

Olsson (2008, p. 3) explains forensic linguistics succinctly in the following way, and authorship comparison is therein a sub-concern.

Forensic linguistics is, rather, the application of linguistic knowledge to a particular social setting, namely the legal forum (from which the word forensic is derived). In its broadest sense we may say that forensic linguistics is the interface between language, crime and law, where law includes law enforcement, judicial matters, legislation, disputes or proceedings in law, and even disputes which only potentially involve some infraction of the law or some necessity to seek a legal remedy.

Authorship identification or authorship attribution is, according to Olsson (2008), almost impossible to reach. With authorship comparison it is a matter of probability rather than factuality (pp. 44-45). On a basic level of investigation, as stated in the previous paragraph, genuine texts of both Conan Doyle and Dr. Watson would be an essential requirement. Olsson refers to this point as known texts (p. 58) for comparison. The correspondence as referred to by Klinger (2013) could help to establish a baseline of both authors if the correspondence between them is clearly differentiated by signatures. From there the actual investigation can commence on other genuine works of Conan Doyle and Dr. Watson with the Sherlock Holmes canon as the main text for comparison. This is already quite complicated, but with forensic linguistics it becomes even more a matter of specialist research with the interwoven levels of language (lexical, syntactic, and morphological) at work as indicators. Quantitative research into the

markedness (linguistic particularities in individual language usage) of the canon is necessary with regard to non-standard and unusual language. With this markedness as a recurrent feature throughout the text and the other assumed texts by the same author, the outcome could only be a higher degree of possibility for one particular author than the other in comparison. Authorship identification or attribution will not be an attainable goal from the outset. The canon is distinctive in its marked 19th-century linguistic development, quite distinctive from present-day English. The reason that a forensic method is suggested in this article is because Sherlock Holmes canon has become a forensic text since Klinger (2013) addresses the controversy of its authorship. The canon started as a series of Sherlock Holmes adventures (in total, 60 in number), but evolved into forensic text material for the study of authorship controversies. Coulthard (2000) describes basic methods with examples from three text types. The first type deals with police records of suspects' statements, the second type with student essays and plagiarism, and the third type with co-writing publications. He suggests (p. 282) the Winter/Wool method to include also "average sentence length" and "lexical richness" as indicators for individual styles. Singular vocabulary use is problematic when for instance academic papers on a single subject share similar vocabulary (p. 280). These methods include mainly quantitative methods wherein a common number could signify a higher possibility for a particular author from a small number of candidates (p. 271). For the Canon Doyle/Watson issue the methods could be implemented with control group writings (p. 284) of both authors.

Conclusion

In this article I introduced an issue regarding the authorship of the Sherlock Holmes canon. According to different sources the authorship has been attributed to either Conan Doyle or his contemporary Dr. Watson. However, the issue is still unresolved and should be further researched. For that purpose I suggested sources and documents that were independent of Sherlockian sources. As a

research method, forensic linguistics, which studies text in legal or criminal setting; authorship disputes is one such area where forensic linguistics are involved and could possibly offer further insights to the research.

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Appendix

The appendix from Redmond (2009, pp. 322-323) has been included here for its clear representation of the titles with their customary abbreviations. Reprinted with permission.

APPENDIX

THE SIXTY TALES

EACH STORY TITLE IS LISTED (with its conventional ABBREVIATION, devised by early Sherlockian scholar Jay Finley Christ, in capitals) along with its date of first publication.

A **STUDY** in Scarlet¹ [December] 1887

The **SIGN** of the Four^{1 2} February 1890

THE ADVENTURES OF SHERLOCK HOLMES

A **SCANDAL** in Bohemia July 1891
The **RED-Headed** League August 1891
A Case of **IDEN**trity September 1891
The **BOSCOMBE** Valley Mystery October 1891
The **FIVE** Orange Pips November 1891
The Man with the **TWISTED** Lip December 1891
²The **BLUE** Carbuncle January 1892
²The **SPECKLED** Band February 1892
²The **ENGINEER'S** Thumb March 1892
²The **NOBLE** Bachelor April 1892
²The **BERYL** Coronet May 1892
²The **COPPER** Beeches June 1892

THE MEMOIRS OF SHERLOCK HOLMES

¹**SILVER** Blaze December 1892
²The **YELLOW** Face February 1893
²The **STOCK**-broker's Clerk March 1893
²The "GLORIA SCOTT"
April 1893
²The **MUSGRAVE** Ritual May 1893
²The **REIGATE** Squires⁴ June 1893
²The **CROOKED** Man July 1893
²The **RESIDENT** Patient August 1893
²The **GREEK** Interpreter September 1893
²The **NAVAL** Treaty October–November 1893
²The **FINAL** Problem December 1893

The **HOUND** of the Baskervilles¹ August–April 1901–02

APPENDIX: THE SIXTY TALES

THE RETURN OF SHERLOCK HOLMES

¹ The EMPTy House	September 1903
² The NORWood Builder	October 1903
³ The DANCing Men	December 1903
⁴ The SOLItary Cyclist	December 1903
⁵ The PRIOrY School	January 1904
⁶ BLACK Peter	February 1904
⁷ CHARleS Augustus Milverton	March 1904
⁸ The SIX Napoleons	April 1904
⁹ The Three [3] STUdents	June 1904
¹⁰ The GOLDen Pince-Nez	July 1904
¹¹ The MISSing Three-Quarter	August 1904
¹² The ABBEY Grange	September 1904
¹³ The SECONd Stain	December 1904
The VALLEy of Fear ¹	September–May 1914–15

HIS LAST BOW

WISTeria Lodge ²	August 1908
³ The CARDboard Box ⁴	January 1893
⁵ The RED Circle ⁷	March–April 1911
⁶ The BRUCe-Partington Plans	December 1908
⁸ The DYING Detective	November 1913
The Disappearance of LADY Frances Carfax	December 1911
⁹ The DEVil's Foot	December 1910
His LAST Bow ⁸	September 1917

THE CASE-BOOK OF SHERLOCK HOLMES

¹ The ILLUstrious Client	November 1924
² The BLANched Soldier	October 1926
³ The MAZArin Stone	October 1921
⁴ The Three [3] GABLEs	September 1926
⁵ The SUSSEX Vampire	January 1924
⁶ The Three [3] GARridebs	October 1924
The Problem of THOR Bridge	February 1922
⁷ The CREEping Man	March 1923
⁸ The LION's Mane	November 1926
⁹ The VEILed Lodger	January 1927
¹⁰ SHOScombe Old Place	March 1927
¹¹ The RETIred Colourman	December 1926

1 Novel length; others are short stories.

2 In many editions, just *The Sign of Four*.

3 In the original publication, "The Adventure of" preceded this title.

4 In its earliest publication, "The Reigate Squire"; in most American editions, "The Reigate Puzzle."

5 Formally, "The Adventure of Wisteria Lodge." First published as "The Singular Experience of Mr. John Scott Eccles: A Reminiscence of Mr. Sherlock Holmes."

6 Appeared in the earliest book edition of *The Memoirs*, in its appropriate chronological place, but suppressed thereafter, and introduced into *His Last Bow* twenty years later.

7 Originally subtitled "A Reminiscence of Sherlock Holmes."

8 Subtitled "The War Service of Sherlock Holmes" or "An Epilogue of Sherlock Holmes."