

Women, Economics, and Sherlock Holmes's Gift-Labor

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Abstract

Detective fiction of all types is distinguished by its close attention to work, work which is frequently construed as gift. The gift character of detective labor, which first registers as unremunerated labor, ultimately incurs unpayable debts with ostensibly valuable social functions. But far from genuinely registering as aneconomic, the detective's gift-labor frequently entails investment in specific social interests, which, depending upon the subgenre, tends towards the affirmation or negation of dominant modes of social control. Classical detective fiction, exemplified in this essay by early Sherlock Holmes narratives, functions as such an invested gift, one which reinforces an economic frame producing calculated returns involving the reification and circulation of women. The theoretical framework underpinning this analysis begins from Lévi-Strauss's connection between incest prohibition and the gift; this premise is in turn conjoined to a capitalist worldview through Bataille's analysis of marriage and eroticism. After examining the themes of labor and marriage in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, I offer an analysis of three celebrated texts from this collection: "A Case of Identity," "The Adventure of the Speckled Band," and "The Adventure of the Copper Beeches." From these stories, I determine that Holmes consistently buttresses notions of economic exchange whereby women are regarded as forms of capital whose circulation must contend with the blocks posed by recalcitrant father figures. Holmes's intervention forces this "gift" of women, thereby contesting the obstacles represented by these hoarding fathers.

Keywords: detective fiction, labor, gift, economics, marriage, Arthur Conan Doyle

The Notion of Gift Labor

A notable aspect of most detective fiction is its labor focus—many stories exhibit an obsessive concern with the minutiae of detective work *as* work. This tendency is not confined to any specific period or subgenre: it threads the investigations of Classical and Golden Age detectives, hard-boiled private eyes, and the collectivized efforts of the police and forensic procedural. Of course, we do not actually read about work *per se* but the representation of work, and as representation, detective labor consistently signifies as fantasy labor. Partly due to readers' general unfamiliarity with how real detectives operate, partly due to a willing suspension of disbelief, we are prepared to acquiesce in this fantasy, one which ignores the legal prescriptions limiting the actions of real-life professionals,¹ as well as the manifestly impossible solve rates, timeframes, and detective independence from institutional constraints. In short, detective labor generally dispenses with verisimilitude (which would likely be intolerably dull), and so, as fantasy labor, compels an investigation into its attraction, to determine what impulses or interests detective fiction might satisfy.²

The argument developed here builds upon and extends my inquiry into Golden Age and hard-boiled detective labor in *Economic Investigations in Twentieth-Century Detective Fiction*. In the present study I employ models derived from the fields of anthropology and sociology to analyze the functions and social consequences of labor in early detective texts by Arthur Conan Doyle. In the book I argue that the fantasy of detective labor satisfies by offering readers escape *into* a form of labor that differs sharply from the demands of the real workplace. Although the Western detective story originates in Poe in the 1840s, a period of chaotic capitalism in the US and the UK, the genre reaches maturity during the ascendancy of late nineteenth-century monopoly

¹ William Ruehlmann, discussing restrictions on private detectives in the New York legal code, demonstrates the impossibility of their involvement in murder cases or being privy to the inner workings of the official police (3-4).

² Many critics hold to a notion of detective fiction as essentially escapist; the escape is *from* a stressful and unpleasant reality (i.e. work) *into* a pleasurable fantasy. That this pleasure would entail accompanying someone *to* work seems counterintuitive. For a range of positions on detective fiction as escapism, see Dove (2, 41), Knight (*Form* 4), Defino (75), Aydelotte (69-70), Greene (102), Rabinowitz (122), and Alewyn (65).

capitalism. The encroachments of scientific management on the burgeoning white collar world in the early twentieth century (Mills 193, 233), as well as its impact on working class labor regimens, contrast sharply with the detective's control over the work process, its speeds, methods, and outcomes.³ Taylorism's inroads into all modes of wage labor suggest a similar thirst for meaningful labor and self-determining control between subgenres: both the white-collar appeal of the Classical/Golden Age and the working-class associations adhering to the hard-boiled pulps. In story after story, from its late nineteenth-century takeoff to the end of the Second World War and beyond, the detective, as worker, is exceptional—a figure whose frequently underpaid or uncompensated labor is directed towards a product (truth) in which the totality is not only actively determined by detective intervention, but in which most significant aspects of the process remain under his or her control. Certainly, discernible sub-generic distinctions have important functional ramifications. For instance, the detective's eccentric outsider status in the Classical and Golden Age generally serves to buttress interests with which he or she is sympathetic—indeed, eccentricity functionally exteriorizes the detective which helps to define, contain, and neutralize criminal malfeasance. In contrast, the hard-boiled operative, an outsider for different reasons, more typically suffers the alienation resulting from institutional obfuscations of truth—a social totality dominated by powerful interests comes into vision only to be negated by the detective-outcast. In such cases, the detective's rejection of institutional solutions to social injustice does not mean that interest is lessened in the work required to determine the solution. The labor behind the ratiocinative clue-puzzle and the violence of hard-boiled tales both tend towards the resolution of a mystery.

The subgenres find common ground, though, not only in the foregrounding of labor, but in the consistent link between labor and gift, which under normal circumstances suggests a problematic conflation of giving with economic return. The relation, along

³ For an astute summary of Taylor's impact on working-class life see Chapters 5 and 6 of Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital*; for a discussion of pulp detective fiction and Taylor, see Chapter 3 of Erin Smith's *Hard-Boiled: Working Class Readers and Pulp Magazines*.

the lines I establish in this explication of anthropological and philosophical sources (Yan 145-49), concerns the distinction between the economic or aneconomic framing of the gift, that is, whether the gift (of labor in this case) serves the purposes of investment, return, debt, and interest, or whether it embodies expenditure in the sense found in George Bataille's essay from the 1930s. Holmes's labor, his unrecompensed time, brain power, and risk of life and limb, seems to escape calculation. Ostensibly, by uncovering the truth, setting right social wrongs, removing blocks to socially-sanctioned flows of wealth and property, establishing guilt, and removing suspicion from the innocent, Holmes serves a cause irreducible to money transactions; his actions incur an unpayable debt invoking wider goals of social justice. His clients, whom we do not actually see paying up for services rendered, assume vis-à-vis the detective an abstract debt relation that essentially remains unpayable. Holmes's efforts, in this regard, constitute what I have termed detective gift-labor.

Gift-labor refers to unrewarded expenditure which ostensibly escapes reduction to purely economic registers of exchange (i.e. its aneconomic character).⁴ From an individual reader's point of view, the detective's indifference to the time clock and wage scale can be divorced from the social consequences of detective labor. Reflection will lead us to question whether this form of fantasy labor ultimately reinforces the social interests most committed to the status quo, a status quo concretely beneficial to some and at odds with the class interests of readers and detectives. Ultimately, the gift of detective labor is offered within a bounded economy of meaning that encompasses the narrative's events (and which is in part determined by the strong formal expectations of the genre). Within the larger genre, the tendencies of the subgenres differ perceptively: the Classical/Golden Age not only acknowledges but also generally endorses institutional boundaries whereas the hard-boiled frequently offers a critical attitude towards these institutions. Neither representative detective, however, exists independently of these pre-existing limits on meaning.

⁴ Some philosophers question the escape from economic modes of exchange. On this problem see Jacques Derrida's *Given Time* (6-16), Jean-Joseph Goux's "Seneca against Derrida: Gift and Alterity" (149-52), and Rodolphe Gasché's "Heliocentric Exchange" (109-13).

Sherlock Holmes's Gift-Labor

Arthur Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) establishes a precedent for a number of later stories. Though purportedly making his living from his consulting services (92), Holmes devotes considerable resources to the case free of charge. By story's end our detective appears to be in the red: the ring advertisement, the half-sovereign to the ineffectual constable John Rance, and wages for six street children to find Jefferson Hope all come out of his own pocket. This expenditure seems extravagant when we recall that his association with Watson originates in the need to economize on lodgings; moreover, the business use to which the sitting room is put suggests that Holmes is unable to afford office premises.⁵ The strangeness of Holmes's unpaid labor, if it is noticed at all, is likely attributed to his professional commitment, even though by this point in British history no one would expect such behavior from other professionals.⁶ Yet, *A Study in Scarlet* is not an isolated instance. In *The Sign of the Four* (1890) Holmes again pays the Baker Street Irregulars' wages, offers a reward for finding Smith's boat, and hires the dog Toby. Whether he recoups his losses from his client Miss Morstan is doubtful, given the unlikelihood that Holmes would tactlessly send a bill to Watson's bride-to-be.

Sorting out the ideological implications of Holmes's work is difficult due to the uniqueness of his position, emphasized in his disquisition to the incredulous Watson upon the latter's critique of Holmes's essay "The Book of Life." Holmes answers Watson's abrupt question concerning his vocation by remarking: "I suppose I am the only one in the world. I'm a consulting detective, if you can understand what that is" (Doyle, *Study* 92). What that is, apparently, is someone who labors incessantly on a case,

⁵ To be sure, Holmes receives (sometimes lavish) payment on other occasions, most memorably from aristocrats whom he disdains—from the King in "A Scandal in Bohemia," the Duke in "The Priory School," an unnamed aristocrat (possibly Edward VII) in "The Beryl Coronet," and in an oblique reference to "the reigning family of Holland" in "A Case of Identity."

⁶ Holmes's obsessive relation to work is treated by Bassham (145), who emphasizes that his work fetish, notwithstanding less admirable habits like drug abuse, conforms to the Protestant work ethic valued by Victorian contemporaries. Clarke points out Doyle's defensiveness vis-à-vis Victorian suspicions about whether writers really worked at all, in that Holmes's energy is as often internal, thinking rather than actively doing (Clarke 78-79).

possibly placing his life at risk, pays out of pocket for the various things he requires, and then remains uncompensated save for an exhilarating mental experience (which, when wanting in the early stories, is satisfied by drug abuse). The unconventional nature of his work is reinforced in *The Sign of the Four*, where Holmes complains:

“Give me problems, give me work, give me the most abstruse cryptogram, or the most intricate analysis, and I am in my own proper atmosphere. I can dispense then with artificial stimulants. But I abhor the dull routine of existence. I crave for mental exaltation. That is why I have chosen my own particular profession, or rather created it for I am the only one in the world” (Doyle 176).

Or, in later passages from the same text: “the work itself, the pleasure of finding a field for my peculiar powers, is my highest reward” (Doyle 176), or a still more extreme formulation, “I cannot live without brain-work. What else is there to live for?” (Doyle 179). Forgoing payment points not only to a notion of labor as its own end, but in the context of the first story collection, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892), to social functions that operate cryptically within, behind, or beneath other forms of economic exchange. On the surface, Holmes’s labor functions as a gift in that his labor eschews the “contamination” of debt relations in its will to truth: he has changed the nature of reality for his clients. But closer scrutiny reveals Holmes’s gift of labor merely to *mimic* the aneconomic gift form that serves as Other to the norm-based homogeneity of “proper” exchange relations. This point is observable repeatedly in Holmes’s interaction with distressed female clients. In our three focus texts, Holmes intervenes to “free” these women from the control of fathers so that they may be placed into circulation (i.e. their freedom to marry). Initially, Holmes’s work ostensibly sets a secondary gift impulse into motion in his attempts to dislodge women from the control of fathers by prompting them to give up their interests, whether economic or sexual. However, in this equation women find themselves treated like capital, which in its late Victorian mode must not be hoarded. Because the givers in these situations are fathers who renege on their gift-giving role, we must consider the economic dimensions of incest and eroticism to preface our understanding of Doyle’s sexualized economy.

Incest Prohibitions: From Lévi-Strauss to Bataille

Despite their late nineteenth-century appearance, certain stories from *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* invoke primary and long-standing taboos, though their articulation undergoes some structural changes as a consequence of capitalism. The centrality of an economic factor in relation to the taboo may be understood in terms of gifts; the reference point, though, comes from Claude Lévi-Strauss. In *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949) Lévi-Strauss distinguishes basic and complex systems of exogamy. In the first case, exogamic rules restrict the range of potential partners, whereas in the latter, which includes modern literary representations of betrothal and marriage, unions are left to “mechanisms, economic or psychological” (Lévi-Strauss xxiii). These rules are pertinent to the way incest is defined, situated in “the relationship between man’s biological existence and his social existence” (24). Lévi-Strauss argues that incest prohibitions arise from a “link” between biology and society in that it marks a transition to culture, suggesting that it may have a specifically historical character. His conclusions are most directly expressed at the end of the book: “the prohibition of incest is less a rule prohibiting marriage with the mother, sister or daughter, than a rule obliging the mother, sister or daughter to be given to others. It is the supreme rule of the gift” (481). Consequently, the incest prohibition favors the group instead of allowing sexual expenditure to be governed by individual interests. Such management, however, is not understood in individualized terms—it embodies a collective force whose outcomes resemble a law. This generalized force is termed *culture*, and, in Lévi-Strauss, its “prime role...is to ensure the group’s existence as a group, and consequently...to replace chance by organization. The prohibition of incest is a certain form, and even highly varied form, of intervention. But it is intervention over and above anything else; even more exactly, it is *the* intervention” (32). An underlying assumption is that scarcity, the pressure of limited resources, directs the operations of the system. Scarcity applies specifically to women, despite the fact that populations produce roughly equal numbers of both sexes (Lévi-Strauss 38)—a concrete expression of the ways in which wealth and disproportionate social power exert control over “resources.” Lévi-Strauss’s musings on

the consequences of lifting the taboo lead him to imagine a sort of hoarding in the family, which in the end would be “incompatible with the vital demands not only of primitive society but of society in general” (41). This reference to “society in general” clearly does not directly take modern Western society, with its overt conjunction of marriage and economic ideology, as its object. Missing from Lévi-Strauss, however, is the erotic dimension, which apparently is understood to be irreducible to purely economic considerations. Georges Bataille develops this link by bringing marriage and eroticism into the same economy under the aegis of productive relations (or, alternatively, disruptive forms of expenditure in which scarcity does not play an active role).

Bataille offers only relatively minor criticisms of Lévi-Strauss’s basic model, but underlying Bataille’s remarks on incest is the need to explain conditions pertaining to modern social formations. In *The History of Eroticism* (1957) Bataille addresses the ambiguity of marriage as exhibiting contradictory impulses: its conflation of “self-interest and purity, sensuality and the prohibition of sensuality, generosity and avarice.” He continues: “In its initial movement it is the contrary of animality; it is the *gift*” (56) since it postpones or denies the immediacy of “animal gratification” and accepts in its stead only a tenuous promise of return. By “giving away” the woman, the man who gives converts renunciation into expenditure, placing him in proximity to sexual exuberance. Contrariwise, from the husband’s viewpoint, the ability to licitly satisfy sexual desires entails a double movement that brings eroticism within boundaries: “If [eroticism] corresponds to the desire to lose or to risk, it nonetheless has the effect of starting us down the path of acquisition and conservation” (Bataille 139). Thought, calculation, and self-consciousness within the context of purposive action help to distinguish the erotic from undifferentiated animal sexuality.

In light of Bataille’s dilemma of self-consciousness, Doyle’s stories depict the speculative and rationalized use of women. The bourgeois propensity for accumulation parallels an anxiety over loss, so that the gift is unabashedly viewed economically as promising insufficient return. Even ignoring the question of dowry, the retention of the

women's private sphere labor insures her ability to generate revenue or to form the necessary substrate for remunerative (male) public sphere labor. This boon outweighs the "risks" of the gift viewed as investment. Women's complexity in the stories derives from their status as productive, though socially unrecognized, labor and productive capital.⁷ Late Victorian women, on the cusp of assuming greater levels of control, come up against repressive measures from men, even from their so-called male allies. Unlike the "abnormal" state of affairs that Terence Whalen notes in Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," Doyle's maidens do not remove themselves from circulation like the bag of gold coins left undisturbed in Madame L'Espanaye's apartment. Whalen establishes a parallel between the untouched gold hoard, "potential capital that the idiosyncratic Madame L'Espanaye refused to put into productive circulation" and her daughter, "a young woman who has failed to enter the sexual economy through marriage." These two forms of uncirculated capital reveal a position "oppositional to both capitalism and patriarchy" (400-401), which Whalen argues is supposed to encourage unconcern for the victims' fates among readers.

Fifty years later, things have changed. Doyle's sympathetic young women threaten to escape the boundaries of the family economy dominated by the father or father-substitute. The circulation or stagnancy of these women points up how men are able to exploit the labor and capital represented by the female characters, to put it to use or to hoard it. By removing barriers to marriage, Holmes facilitates movement within acceptable norms, but he does not offer recourse to positions outside the boundaries of "normal" control—namely, the independent (New) woman managing her own labor power, time, capital, or body. Holmes's gift-labor tends towards the reinforcement of a system of exchange that favors the gender-divided production schemes of late nineteenth-century capitalism. In this, he hypostatizes the force of culture described by Lévi-Strauss, grounding that culture in an identifiable defender. His position at the

⁷ The argument concerning *Privatdienst*, cogently formulated in Friedrich Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (181ff.), becomes the basis for many materialist feminist texts in the 1960s and 1970s—a lucid example would be Dalla Costa and James's "Women and the Subversion of the Community" (41-42).

margins of the economy—underlined in the early texts by his bohemianism—is a false altruism, labor serving as an Other to that economy in order to facilitate the economy’s primacy.⁸ Holmes thereby defines and reinforces this system from outside its normally invisible parameters. In this dialectical relation of inside (the homogeneous field of normal productive social relations) to outside (the transcendental guarantor), the gift is only aneconomic inasmuch as it allows the economy to underwrite its ideological commitment to preserving (male-determined) productive relations. Holmes’s labor only registers as gift in its irreducibility to pecuniary instruments.

The criminal inclinations of Doyle’s stepfathers, recognized by Moretti, whose principal function is to sequester the inheritance of the rightful heir (140), is foiled by Holmes, who steps in to insure just outcomes. Removing the blockage in the sexual and monetary economies revisits the question posed to Mauss by anthropologists like Marshall Sahlins as to what agency compels the gift in the first place. Lévi-Strauss, it seems, begs the question: “Considered as a prohibition, the prohibition of incest merely affirms, in a field vital to the group’s survival, the pre-eminence of the social over the natural, the collective over the individual, organization over the arbitrary” (45), a statement that possibly conflates the gift with relations of interest, return, stability, and economic regularity. The gift is dissociated from loss to focus instead on stabilizing a conservationist ground of exchange. If the depersonalized agency enforcing the system of gifts is resolved in Holmes, the question is merely pushed back a level. Indeed, what benefit could Holmes derive from his actions? If Holmes is acting within the purview of social needs, these, we might expect, are defined by specific social mechanisms. The motivation to give, or the enforcement of giving, is rendered more obscure by the way in which Holmes is brought into contact with the problems: namely, through female clients who hardly can be said to represent generalized social interests. Holmes’s labor nonetheless appears to function as a regulator of relations, but his rationale is opaque until we clarify our frame of reference.

⁸ For an engaging analysis of Holmes’s peculiar relation to Victorian working norms, see Audrey Jaffe’s “Detecting the Beggar: Arthur Conan Doyle, Henry Mayhew, and ‘The Man with the Twisted Lip’” (412-27).

The relation between sexual availability, domestic labor, and marriage is not one of autonomy for women. Rather, it represents a displacement from one site of control to another: the movement of women from father to husband. The confrontation of use value and exchange value is ultimately defined in masculine terms. Holmes enforces the “law” of exchange by removing (“explaining”) blocks to circulation, but he does so to ensure that the commodity (women) flows between and is mediated by masculine points of reference.⁹ How does the woman, the bearer of a mystery, function in this process when her status is beholden to the investment that men have in her? Women’s complicity in their own reification makes it appear that they seek liberation from fathers only to be re-inscribed within new forms of domestic use value for husbands. In these literary representations, it also depends upon the manipulation of sympathy and perspective, which as Hennessey and Mohan remind us is heavily influenced by Holmes’s “privileged position in the narrative as the subject of knowledge” (392), a form of knowledge that typically does not allow for competing voices from women any more than it does from criminals.

The Marriage Economy in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*

Critics have remarked the family-based “crimes” which crowd *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, true even of the genuinely criminal cases. Along these lines, Diane Barsham declares that “the problem of marriage rather than the solution of crime is the main issue of the early Holmes stories” (118). Moreover, marriage is repeatedly linked to money, prompting the establishment of two poles epitomized by “The Adventure of the Noble Bachelor” and “The Adventure of the Beryl Coronet.” The former story overtly elevates the money-dimension of marriage over erotic interests while shutting down the possibility of circulation once the “proper” ownership of the bride has been determined. The conjunction of marriage and economics is foreshadowed in the facetious newspaper report with which the text opens:

⁹ This idea is developed in a more general context in Luce Irigaray’s essay “Women on the Market” (174).

There will soon be a call for protection in the marriage market, for the present free-trade principle appears to tell heavily against our home product. One by one the management of the noble houses of Great Britain is passing into the hands of our fair cousins from across the Atlantic. An important addition has been made during the last week to the list of prizes which have been borne away by these charming invaders. (Doyle, “Noble” 400)

The conflict involves Lord St. Simon’s unsuccessful attempt to wed a wealthy American heiress, who discovers at the last moment that a man to whom she had been affianced, but thought to be dead, is in fact alive. Holmes’s solution depends upon his correct interpretation of the phrase “jumping a claim” (Doyle, “Noble” 404)—mining parlance which in this context refers to betrothal. The term *claim* suggests the bride’s reduction to the status of property whose ownership changes hands between men. Like a mine, her value can be extracted, or she can be speculated upon as a potential source of wealth. The snobbish, unsympathetic Lord St. Simon’s naked money interest highlights the economic aspect.

The confluence of the economic and erotic is also blocked in “The Adventure of the Beryl Coronet,” another economics-heavy text in its foregrounding of loans, credit, interest, debt, and security in the context of banking. This time, however, the balance shifts towards the erotic as these themes are intertwined with a family drama in which a woman’s value and status in relation to different male figures is interrogated. Banker Alexander Holder entreats Holmes’s aid after three beryls from a jeweled crown, security for a loan, are stolen from his house. The investigation brings Holmes into contact with Holder’s family—his ne’er-do-well son, Arthur, and loving niece, Mary, to whom he serves as a substitute father figure. Contrary to Holder’s hopes, Mary has twice refused Arthur’s marriage proposals. A careful reading, however, draws attention to the ambiguous relation between uncle and niece, who resembles a wife substitute. We note their affectionate intimacy, in which, after the shock of Arthur’s arrest the previous night, Watson reports: “she went straight to her uncle, and passed her hand over his head with a sweet womanly caress” (Doyle, “Beryl” 420), as well as the banker’s

despair at her flight, in which he refers to her “deserting me” (Doyle, “Beryl” 423). We may even suspect a contest between father and son, a point that comes out in Holmes’s description of his interview with Arthur in jail: ““In the middle of the night he heard a soft tread pass his door, so he rose, and looking out, was surprised to see his cousin walking very stealthily along the passage, until she disappeared into your [the father’s] dressing room” (Doyle, “Beryl” 425). In the end, these subtle indications of attraction between uncle and niece are obscured by the revelation of Mary’s duplicitous and indeed criminal behavior. Mary’s “value” to the household is eclipsed by the reader’s indignation at her aiding a blackguard to criminally injure her benefactor Holder and to dupe his son Arthur. Her domestic and erotic “value” thereby are both compromised.

The (quasi)-incestuous overtones of this story are unremarked in the scholarship; however, other stories from the same collection have attracted such notice, including all my focus texts: “A Case of Identity,” “The Adventure of the Speckled Band,” and “The Adventure of the Copper Beeches.”¹⁰ We should note that the incest theme in these texts cannot be regarded as true incest since in fact there is no overt sexual relationship between blood relations. Nonetheless, the age differences, living arrangements, and the nominal kinship links created by social convention connote incestuous contact. Although Doyle and his readers would have balked at the direct portrayal of incest in this class of society, Hennessey and Mohan remark that incest “was a cultural preoccupation throughout the late nineteenth century,” and understood to be symptomatic of the impoverished end of the class scale (398). The theme itself perhaps would not have raised eyebrows to the degree that our residual stereotypes of Victorian propriety warrant had the stories involved characters lower on the social ladder. If such thoughts crossed readers’ minds, they likely would serve to emphasize how the three men fail to uphold their own class mores—certainly possible given, in Kestner’s phrase, that “the sanctioned ideal of manliness” is overturned by the stories’ three villains (18).

In all the stories the exchange of women via marriage is blocked by amorous/hostile

¹⁰ See Roth (141); Hennessey and Mohan (395-9); Atkinson (33, 112-13); Thomas (88); Kestner (17); Barsham (108); and Knight (“Case” 377-8).

(step)fathers. In each case, the sexual subtext is inextricable from a financial motive, so that economic concerns inform the gift in a necessarily composite way. The conjoining of incest and gift, in the sense of Lévi-Strauss, leads to the thesis that Doyle's brides or potential brides are blocked gifts. As such, they exemplify interrupted exchange or circulation. In Holmes's attempts to guarantee the "circulation" of women, he reconstitutes patriarchal authority even when (or because) that authority is revealed to be immoral or criminal. Women are treated as capital to be freed up, as the liberation of hoarded wealth. In this, the basic situation is modern: incest as a block to marriage is conflated with the money economy. The economic dimension is highlighted by the investment capital possessed by the daughters or stepdaughters, the interest of which is controlled by the nominal or biological father as long as the daughter remains unwed. Holmes's investigative activities subtly draw attention to the link between incest prohibition and gift within the frame of late Victorian society; thematically, this situation echoes Lévi-Strauss's notion of the (blocked) gift of women. Holmes's gift-labor endorses exchange over consumption in his effort to prompt women's "circulation" through marriage. But, the favoring of exchange over "use" entails the reification of women: Holmes serves as a middleman linking two points of potential consumption, namely, the (step)father and the prospective husband.

"A Case of Identity"

"A Case of Identity" (1891) begins with a meta-discursive commentary on crime narratives, particularly as they are represented in popular media. Watson complains about the predictable, mundane, and hackneyed state of journalism, but Holmes dissents, claiming that reality trumps the imagination. Holmes's downplaying of Watson's prejudices is ironic since, as Atkinson suggests, Holmes himself is curiously unable to see anything in "A Case of Identity" but the money motive.

Holmes and Watson are visited by Mary Sutherland, a young lady who lives with her mother and stepfather, James Windibank. Although Mary refers to Windibank as her father, he is but five years her senior; she further gives out indirectly that the marriage

was prompted more by her late father's interest in a plumbing business than romantic attraction. Mary engages Holmes to find out what has become of her missing fiancé, Hosmer Angel, a man whom she has met only a handful of times. The relationship commenced when her stepfather was away in France on business as a representative of his wine-importing firm. Her secretiveness stems from consternation over Windibank's objection to her socializing with men her own age, which the reader understands as a ploy to prevent a possible engagement. Windibank's motive is apparently connected to the interest Mary receives on a lucrative investment: the money is passed on to her mother for household use, while Mary satisfies her own needs through work as a typist. Naturally, this interest income will not reach the family coffers when she marries. Hosmer Angel is a reclusive person, who, though only having met Mary a few times, successfully proposes and in fact takes her as far as the altar before mysteriously vanishing. Despite her inquiries, the lack of concrete information about Angel's background, occupation, and address interferes with discovering his whereabouts or the reasons for his strange disappearance. Holmes's inquiry reveals the stepfather to have acted the part of the lover with the connivance of his wife: Angel/Windibank hopes to cash in on indefinitely postponing Mary's marriage—and, given her devotion to her lover, he likely will achieve his objective. By discerning the financial motive, Holmes brings a good father/bad father structure into view, a pattern which resurfaces in later texts. Windibank, the bad father, has not only taken the place of the good father, now dead, but has usurped the fruits of his labor; in his surrogate father's role, he understands Mary's value only in terms of the interest borne by her investment. The hoarding father's vision of Mary's fecundity—at least along the lines Holmes takes towards the problem—lies in her value-generating capacity. And yet, Holmes remains blind to the sexual subtext, neatly reducing Bataille's erotic ambivalence to a univocal reading.

But Windibank's role in "giving away" the daughter reveals another investment dimension: by taking her to the altar he in fact deviously gives her to himself. The hoarding father reduces Mary to a use value rather than an exchange value, yet this

value extends beyond the dividend from an investment; it refers simultaneously to her sexual consumption, a connection which brings us within Bataille's province. Irony resurfaces when Holmes pronounces: "The only drawback is that there is no law, I fear, that can touch the scoundrel" (Doyle, "Case" 294). Presumably, he means the intention to defraud within the family is not actionable (if indeed it is punishable) because no one would publicly parade such scandal. But another law is at work, that of exchange and the gift. The relations in "A Case of Identity" point up a paradoxical connection between surplus value and expenditure: Mary Sutherland is withdrawn from circulation to derive value from her non-circulation. In the parallel sexual economy, the father withdraws her from circulation (in the guise of the false suitor), not for his own sexual consumption but for an ascetic denial of sexual consummation. His actions reproduce his earlier decision to marry an older woman, forgoing sexual consumption (Bataillan *consummation*) for money.

The emotional economy of the family romance is reduced to the common denominator of financial advantage, whose deeper-lying incest taboo is concealed by a relationship with the stepfather instead of the father and an age difference that makes biological parentage impossible. At the same time, the slight age discrepancy encourages a stronger romantic bond between daughter and stepfather than with the wife who is fifteen years his senior—in fact a more "natural" bond in that it would ostensibly be established on sexual interest rather than, as Holmes later believes, purely self-seeking financial motives. The situation then divides the psychological aspect of the gift into its contrary and in fact self-contradictory elements by representing mother and daughter as two aspects of Windibank's investment—one purely monetary and the other sexual, respectively.

Atkinson pinpoints a blind spot in Holmes's analysis, namely, that "greed and gullibility" dominate his reading of the problem to the point that he fails to recognize how a romantic relation might escape money interests (112-13). Thomas astutely remarks this point in terms of Mary: "Whether her blindness represents a repressed erotic desire for her stepfather or an unrecognized complicity with her own repression is

never made clear” (87). Holmes’s insistence on an economic reading that transcends individual erotic love reduces the relations to reified identities which fit into a broader capitalist framework—and we note this tendency against Lévi-Strauss’s reading of incest prohibition as buttressing group survival and identity even in the present-day. Indeed, Holmes comprehends identity positions as generalized functions regulated by impersonal agencies, themselves reflecting social tendencies. Thus, our understanding of the characters “as authentic, singular, unified subjects” is undermined in favor of their reduction to “congeries of forces and factors and impressions” (Thomas 87), and Mary herself is understood by Windibank as “a commodity” (Thomas 88).¹¹

Finally, we note the blocked exchange of women and the threat economic independence poses to this exchange principle. Within the confines of her class position Mary’s potential economic independence intrudes upon men’s regulation of the marriage market—the problem is rendered less offensive to the reader through the relation of stepfather, rather than father, and the unsympathetic portrait of the mother as co-conspirator. The opaque desire for the (step)father is Mary’s relinquishing of economic independence, which is Windibank’s goal anyway. Holmes wraps up the story by claiming that women of Mary’s “type” must remain deluded since they are incapable of dealing with the truth because they choose irrational belief rather than logical analysis buoyed by evidence. More charitably, Holmes’s dismissive remark could be read as an ideological critique, in which women must become aware of the systemic limits placed upon them; they must view these as problematic in order to name that system and to resist or overturn it. But rather than grant such critical acumen to the misogynistic Holmes, we would be better advised to read his comment as disapproving of the stepfather’s morality without disputing the need for his ultimate authority; he sums up his position in a statement to Watson before interviewing Windibank: “it is just as well that we should do business with the male relatives” (Doyle, “Case” 293). And

¹¹ For a general discussion of literary characters as economic abstractions, see Jean-Joseph Goux’s *The Coiners of Language* (56-7).

yet, by drawing attention to a systemic principle, Doyle reflects social anxiety over whether such authority can in the long run be maintained.

“The Adventure of the Speckled Band”

Purportedly the favorite of readers and Doyle alike, “The Adventure of the Speckled Band” further develops problems established in “A Case of Identity.” The client, Helen Stoner, suspects that her life is threatened by menacing forces—the same forces which caused her sister’s death two years earlier. To avoid censure by her stepfather, she secretly comes to London to consult with Holmes. Following the death of her father in India, her mother married Dr. Grimesby Roylott; after returning to England, the mother died in an accident whereupon Helen and her sister Julia moved to Dr. Roylott’s family estate. The doctor, the last scion of an ancient but dissipated noble lineage, is a ruthless and dangerous man with a family history of madness, and whose disillusionment was amplified by a prison term in India for the murder of a servant. Her portrayal of Roylott’s character is later confirmed when he bursts into the Baker Street flat to confront Holmes over the visit of his stepdaughter, whom he has had followed. During her consultation, Helen narrates the strange circumstances around her sister’s death just prior to her marriage. The cause of Julia’s death was never satisfactorily determined, and the few available clues made the mystery even more impenetrable, given the locked room character of the crime.

Helen, now herself engaged to be married, has been forced by some trifling repairs to her quarters to move into the chamber where her sister died. Upon retiring she hears the “low whistle” which presaged Julia’s death—immediately she comes to Holmes, who, after inspecting the bedroom, determines that the doctor has established a small communicating passage into the room through which, it is later discovered, he introduces a poisonous Indian snake. The snake’s venom, untraceable by English physicians, causes nearly instantaneous death, effectively preventing the victim from giving clues as to its cause or indicating the guilty party. Like in “A Case of Identity,” the motive appears to be money since the depreciation of the doctor’s investments

coupled with the loss of income from the departing stepdaughters' capital (of which, like Windibank, he enjoys the use of the interest while the women stay with him) will seriously affect his finances. Holmes and Watson, astutely stationing themselves in Helen's bedroom, uncover his ploy, and Holmes's vigorous measures drives the snake back to Roylott's chamber where it turns upon its master, causing his death.

The glaring impossibilities in the text, particularly those related to snakes and their unlikely use as murder weapons, are detailed by critics (Hodgson 336; Atkinson 28)—but like in “A Case of Identity,” Holmes's inability to see beyond what he wants to see, to admit impossibilities into the “logical” sequence of events as he determines them, allows him to construct explanations that remain blind to plausible alternatives. Holmes again finds himself in contention with fathers or father substitutes. However, we note his shifting position in the family grouping. After revealing his knowledge of Windibank's plot, Holmes goes so far as to threaten him physically as a “brother” might be expected to do (Doyle, “Case” 296). The confrontation in “The Speckled Band” assumes a clearer good father/bad father relation that encompasses Holmes himself (Peach 82), a point suggested in Roylott's invasion of Holmes's rooms. The gist of this confrontation, in which Roylott demonstrates his strength by twisting an iron fireplace implement, points towards the respective roles of the contestants. Roylott's bending of the poker and Holmes's straightening it out again are indicative of separate economic modes, each of which lays claim to Helen's fate. In the first, Roylott assaults another man's “poker” which he understands to intrude into his private affairs. This sexual metaphor alludes to a jealous protection of possession, retention, in short, hoarding. Holmes's action, rather than expressing his sexual potency or desire, is the “straightening out” of the sexual economy and its restoration to “normalcy” and to “usefulness” (i.e. against the uselessness of a bent poker).¹² But in both economies Helen is subjected, in absentia, to a contest between men who are neither related to her nor consult her over their decisions. Their actions reduce her to an object which is

¹² Godfrey makes references to this scene as “the detective's capacity to correct the deformity in Roylott's family tree” (118).

“reconfigured” without her consent. We shall return to Holmes’s role in “giving away” the bride—safely inserting her into a sanctioned marriage—later on in reference to Hennessey and Mohan’s analysis.

The sexual themes in this tale, particularly the suggestion of incest, are noted by several critics (Knight, “Case” 377-8; Atkinson 33; Barsham 108), and are more overt than in “A Case of Identity.” Moreover, the economic backdrop is more detailed in the decline of an aristocratic family and the financial pressures that force the heir to enter the professions. But Dr. Roylott’s attempt to establish bourgeois respectability through work is unsuccessful due to his innate tendencies. This deviant strain returns in force when he must abandon his professional role, and it is further aggravated after his return to the family estate. The sexual overtones of the story entail a coalescence of the exotic and the phallic in that the doctor employs a deadly snake to penetrate his stepdaughter’s bedroom through an air duct and to enter her bed in the middle of the night. Unlike his insensitive reading of “A Case of Identity,” Holmes initially seems more astute, claiming that he foresaw some means of entry in that Julia’s “room” was breached by smoke from the doctor’s “cigar” (Doyle, “Speckled” 372). The phallic intrusions commence at the point when the unfortunate woman is engaged to be married—the removal of funds from her stepfather’s coffers, but also her escape from his influence and control as she comes into the possession of another man.

Although Watson manipulates our sympathies so that we unequivocally identify with Holmes, his position basically remains ambiguous. Holmes facilitates Helen’s circulation in “The Speckled Band,” liberating her from the control of the evil (step)father who wishes to monopolize her use. But, underneath his actions we find the assumption that women are in fact a form of property. This point is forcibly made by Hennessey and Mohan, the story’s most insightful commentators: “In staging the murder as symbolic rape...the narrative [“The Speckled Band”] dramatizes the sexual economy of patriarchy: the equation of woman and property. At the same time, it presents Holmes as woman’s protector, rescuing her from the villainous patriarch’s domination and defending her right to control over her own property and person” (390).

Though, of course, this “control” is short-lived, as the stepfather’s death is a precondition to Helen’s marriage and a new (though likely more comfortable) form of control. Holmes frees up female capital from its private and “selfish” consumption by instituting the gift that Roylott is unwilling to make. In doing so, Holmes enables a system of marriage which affirms that women have limited sexual or property rights—or more to the point, their bodies as property are entitled to others.

“The Adventure of the Copper Beeches”

“The Adventure of the Copper Beeches” opens with a disgruntled Holmes complaining to Watson about the unimaginative, intellectually-deficient criminal mind which blocks him from realizing his proper market price; as in “A Case of Identity,” the preamble ironically sets us up for what follows. The client, Violet Hunter, who follows upon the heels of this tirade, seeks his advice whether to accept a governess position. Though handsomely paid, the job entails dubious demands from the master, Mr. Rucastle. Holmes has misgivings, and so advises her to be observant and to write him upon any sign of trouble. Rucastle’s requests concerning Violet’s dress and behavior are subsequently explained, when Holmes, with Watson’s aid, exposes Rucastle’s imprisonment of his daughter Alice. Violet has been brought in to impersonate her, while Alice, confined to a disused portion of her father’s house, is prevented from eloping with her fiancé. Upon entering Alice’s prison, however, the rescuers find the rooms empty; presumably the fiancé has successfully liberated her. Rucastle, having returned to find the intruders, releases a guard dog, which serves the ends of poetic justice by turning upon its own master, leaving him alive but broken.

“The Copper Beeches” is the third tale of *The Adventures* in which a marriage is blocked within a sexual economy determined by a dangerous father figure. The story is disturbing in its overt aggressiveness: the daughter is literally held hostage, this time by her biological father instead of more indirect forms of control exerted by stepfathers. Real imprisonment replaces the “voluntary” association in “A Case of Identity” and intermittent or indirect forms of control in “The Speckled Band”—a movement in these

two stories from psychological manipulation (Windibank's ruse) to "reasoned" spatial confinement (spurious repairs to Helen's room) culminates in Alice's actual detention. Though exerting a definite influence, she is literally absent from the text. These details are gathered later, but the sinister atmosphere that hangs over the Copper Beeches and its inhabitants is first perceived as an economic irregularity. Holmes's anxiety is concrete on this point: "Well, yes, of course, the pay is good—too good. That is what makes me uneasy. Why should they give you £120 a year, when they could have their pick for £40? There must be some strong reason behind it" (Doyle, "Copper" 432), a point echoed by Watson: "The unusual salary, the curious conditions, the light duties, all pointed to something abnormal" (Doyle, "Copper" 433).

The good father/bad father theme, oblique in the other texts, is more overt in "The Copper Beeches." In the previous stories the good father is dead, leaving Holmes the option of filling this role as a foil to the villainous stepfathers, though clearly he hesitates to do so. As noted, he self-consciously takes on the role of brother at the close of "A Case of Identity"; Atkinson suggests he plays both fiancé and sister in "The Speckled Band": on the one hand, he assertively defends Helen Stoner, which Atkinson understands to be the fiancé's role as well as passes the night in her bedroom, and on the other, Holmes acts out the part of the victim, Julia, assuming a similar posture and language as she (35).¹³

Holmes in "The Copper Beeches" appears much more willing to step into the father's role for his client, a woman who subsequently is employed to play the part of the daughter vis-à-vis Holmes's foil, the bad father Rucastle. Hunter's easy slide from independence to dependence, from assertiveness to victimization, is evident from the start. Entering the flat on Baker Street, she is described as "a woman who has had her own way to make in the world" (Doyle, "Copper" 429). However, this portrait is belied by her plea to Holmes: "I have had a very strange experience, and as I have no parents

¹³ Atkinson misses the irony of this bedroom scene: Holmes may be spending the night in a woman's room, but he does so with Watson, who is instructed by Holmes to "have your pistol ready in case we should need it" while Holmes fingers his "long, thin cane" (Doyle, "Speckled 382). The "symbolic rape" which Hennessey and Mohan read in Roylott's treatment of his stepdaughter assumes a homoerotic dimension in this attempted rape (of Holmes by Roylott).

or relations of any sort from whom I could ask advice, I thought that perhaps you would be kind enough to tell me what I should do” (Doyle, “Copper” 429). Her later impersonation of Alice has complex ramifications. Rucastle’s imprisonment of his daughter stems from his desire—echoing the earlier narratives—to control the money left to her by her mother, now deceased. In line with “A Case of Identity” and “The Speckled Band,” the money is lost to the family upon marriage. Unbeknownst to Violet, she is to parade herself as the daughter and to comply with Rucastle’s demands, namely, to indicate her satisfaction with home life and to display disapproval of her erstwhile fiancé’s attentions. Into this mix is added a new twist in the form of a possessive and competitive stepmother, fifteen years younger than Rucastle and thus not that distant in age from Alice.

By entering the Rucastle household, Violet becomes embroiled in a network of relations gravitating around the missing Alice. Once more, the daughter is suspended between fiancé and father, but, more complexly, she also stands in a peculiar relation to Violet and to Mrs. Rucastle. Violet quite literally doubles Alice, acting as a public self, on display and assumedly in control (the favoring of suitors, the dispensation of her money). The real Alice is literally a prisoner locked away in the attic. Figuratively, however, Violet is no less a prisoner in terms of her economic position. Alice/Violet’s relation to the stepmother adds yet another dimension to this convoluted situation. The rivalry between stepmother and Alice is given out as the basis for Alice’s supposed immigration—the animosity appears to be founded upon competition for Mr. Rucastle’s affections, placing Mrs. Rucastle into a third daughter position in that she sees herself on par with Alice, an idea suggested by Atkinson (130). The tripartite structure complicates “The Copper Beeches” in that the father conflates all these womenfolk (wife, daughter, and daughter substitute). The wife is available for sexual consumption, having borne Rucastle a son; the daughter is hoarded away out of sight as if in the vault of a bank to conserve and protect her value (interest income); and the surrogate daughter, used to play the public role of the hoarded daughter, ostensibly remains free to consent to or reject appeals made from outside. This illusion of freedom is underlined outside

the family structure by the buyer's market for female labor that threatens Violet and prompts her to submit to Rucastle in the first place.

Conclusion

The doubling of characters and roles in "The Copper Beeches" fits into a trajectory involving the other two tales. Mary Sutherland essentially stands alone, combining various functions within herself—she is independent inasmuch as she possesses the skills and capital to get along modestly without men; however, she is of a disposition to marry, and in any case, she is not threatened with destitution. If she is doubled, her double is her own mother, who occupies a socially-sanctioned role with Windibank that Mary might prefer to fill; thus a sordid love triangle is foiled by Holmes, though its parallel money economy remains unaffected. Windibank presumably renounces his sexual interest in Mary but retains control of her capital—that is, her body as value-generating in terms of money. In short, Mary's labor and her sexual availability are retained in the home. Helen Stoner is in an even less admirable position, living in relative poverty in a dilapidated house, without female companionship after her sister's death, and in the company of an unpredictable and unsociable man. As Hennessey and Mohan have remarked, however, her survival is paired with the death of Julia, demonstrating the range of fates to which middle-class women are subjected. Violet Hunter's plight is direr still, despite the more upbeat conclusion of the story. Not being held in reserve by any family, she has no option but to sell her labor on the market to the highest bidder. Unlike Mary and Helen, she possesses no fund by which she is made the bearer or object of interest. The seriousness of her position is underlined by her desperation in finding a position, and the necessity of selling herself to a man who instinctively generates mistrust. Mentioning to Holmes that she "was already in debt to [her] tradesman," she is heartened by the advance on her wages that he offers, while all the while cognizant that "there was something unnatural about the whole transaction" (Doyle, "Copper" 430).

All the stories share this much: transactions are conducted by men, whose sexual and economic interests are intertwined and ultimately preserved. Mrs. Toller, Rucastle's housekeeper, explains that Alice was willed money that she allowed her father to use, but that "when there was a chance of a husband coming forward, who would ask for all that the law could give him, then her father thought it time to put a stop on it. He wanted her to sign a paper so that whether she married or not, he could use her money" (Doyle, "Copper" 442). The woman is but a factor in a transaction between men—amazingly like-minded men in that both want the use of Alice's money. As with Mary and Helen, the economy is defined by men's prerogatives; women drop out of the equation as active participants. In the stories, Holmes strives with criminal fathers, but he remains in service to an ideology that aligns him with the men he ostensibly opposes. To be sure, the apparent gift of his efforts is premised on his free labor and personal risk-taking. When the question of his fee is raised in "The Speckled Band," the client's worries are dismissed—"you are at liberty to defray whatever expenses I may be put to, at the time which suits you best" (Doyle 370), he remarks. We remain ignorant as to whether Holmes is recompensed for the other cases, confirming Watson's standard encomium that Holmes "work[s]...for the love of his art [rather] than for the acquirement of wealth" (Doyle, "Speckled" 368). In "The Copper Beeches," having discharged his function of protecting the surrogate daughter (and the public disclosure of Rucastle's criminal behavior), Holmes settles back into detached disinterestedness, causing Watson to complain at the story's end of his indifference to his erstwhile client's future career.

To conclude, we can summarize some of the ideological points raised by Holmes's gift-labor. Within the stories under consideration, his actions appear to escape the economic reduction of the gift in that he works outside the wage system and without the tangible expectation of pecuniary return. His gift of labor in the three focus texts is aimed at the freeing up and giving away of women, though he is unsuccessful with Mary and too late to take credit for Alice. The movement of women does not benefit Holmes in any obvious way. Rather, the "benefactor" is a social mode of control defined as bourgeois and male. Holmes's actions tend to buttress this social

configuration's ideological boundaries, boundaries that are threatened equally by intractable hoarders (bad fathers) *and* expenditures threatening certain types of productive relation (independent women). In the first case, that of the fathers, incest is thematized as a calculated element within the system rather than destabilizing free expenditure (Bataille's eroticism). In the second case, women are represented as complicit with their fates. Their apparent activity, by which they approach Holmes as clients, is ironically an admission of helplessness on the one hand, and a plea (more precisely, a *represented* plea) to be integrated into a patriarchal system on the other.

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