

Lucyna Krawczyk-Żywko

The Case of Neo-Victorian Demotions: Colonel Sebastian Moran on Screen

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When Arthur Conan Doyle resurrected Sherlock Holmes in “The Adventure of the Empty House” (1903), the detective was instantly confronted with “the most cunning and dangerous criminal in London” – Colonel Sebastian Moran (Doyle 801). Introducing such a serious adversary, the right hand of the late Professor Moriarty, served to both grip the readers’ interest and re-establish the detective’s invincibility. Even though Holmes managed to expose Moriarty’s gang, his victory over the “Napoleon of crime” (Doyle 719) was not complete – the final duel was physical and both men were presumed dead; as it turned out, only the latter perished in the Reichenbach Falls. While in nearly all the adaptations the Professor’s counterparts outgrow the character presented in the source texts, Moran’s role has been diminishing, culminating in the neo-Victorian productions. The term neo-Victorian is used here to denote works that are “*self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 4, original emphasis), and the analysed titles reinterpret the Holmesian canon: Guy Ritchie’s *Sherlock Holmes* films (2009 and 2011) retain Victorian aesthetics but deliver a fast-paced and action-packed version of the detective’s adventures; the CBS’s *Elementary* (2012–) and the BBC’s *Sherlock* (2010–) rediscover the sleuth’s modernity and transport him into the twenty-first-century reality. Their revisions of Doyle’s characters, adjusted to modern audiences’ needs and expectations, result in quite a few alterations and while certain characters gain in importance, others have to lose significance.

The now-classic adaptations and pastiches depict Moran as an independent character and a relevant part of the plot. In the Rathbone/Bruce *Terror by Night* (1946), Holmes describes the Colonel as “the most sinister, ruthless and diabolic henchman of our late but unlamented friend, Professor Moriarty” that specialises in “spectacular jewel robberies,” employs paid assassins and other criminals, and uses an air pistol to poison his victims. Under the guise of a shared colonial army past, Moran (Alan Mowbray) befriends Watson and is able to fool everyone but Holmes. The Brett/Hardwicke “The Empty House” (1986) presents Moran (Patrick Allen) as both a sniper intent on killing the detective and a quasi-respectable member of the Victorian society. The Colonel’s demotion from Doyle’s “bosom friend of Moriarty” (Doyle 801) that tries to avenge the Professor’s death to a mercenary assassin, an errand boy, and even a pawn, is apparent in recent film and TV productions – Guy Ritchie’s *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* and the first season of *Elementary*. Of particular interest in this context is Moran’s ambiguous absence/presence in *Sherlock*, especially since other minor characters – e.g. Mrs Hudson – have been developed and given more prominence. This trend fits into Sabine Vanacker’s comment on literary neo-Victorian “afterings” of Doyle’s texts, which “perform the modern reader’s desire, creating a Holmesian world that is no longer the homosocial late-Victorian environment but a recreated fictional past now profoundly sympathetic to women and to

a feminist view” (99). After presenting Doyle’s original Sebastian Moran, the paper will try to examine his recent revisions and account for his demotion.

Holmes’s knowledge of Sebastian Moran is best summarised in his index of biographies, with some facts added during a conversation with Watson:

Moran, Sebastian, Colonel. Unemployed. Formerly 1st Bangalore Pioneers. Born London, 1840. Son of Sir Augustus Moran, C.B., once British Minister to Persia. Educated Eton and Oxford. Served in Jowaki Campaign, Afghan Campaign, Charasiab (despatches), Sherpur, and Cabul. Author of “Heavy Game of the Western Himalayas” (1881); “Three Months in the Jungle” (1884). Address: Conduit Street. Clubs: The Anglo-Indian, the Tankerville, the Bagatelle Card Club. [. . .] Colonel Moran began to go wrong. Without any open scandal, he still made India too hot to hold him. He retired, came to London, and again acquired an evil name. (“EH” 812, 813)¹

The comparison of these few facts to the life of Professor Moriarty reveals some striking similarities: both men come from good families and received proper gentleman’s education; Moran’s “career [was] that of an honourable soldier” (“EH” 812), Moriarty’s of an academic – in both cases until some mysterious events force them to end it. As a result, Moran comes back to England, and Moriarty moves to London “where he set up as an army coach” (“FP” 718), and this is probably how their paths crossed. Both turn their energies to crime, with the Colonel becoming “the second most dangerous man in London” (“EH” 812), “chief of [Moriarty’s] staff [. . .] used [. . .] only in one or two very high-class jobs, which no ordinary criminal could have undertaken” (“EH” 813).

If Moriarty is brilliant but typical brains, Moran is not the typical brawn but “the best heavy-game shot that our Eastern Empire has ever produced” (“EH” 807) and even “one of the best shots in the world” (“EH” 813); his weapon of choice is an air-gun, “admirable,” “unique,” “noiseless and of tremendous power,” made by one “Von Herder, the blind German mechanic, who constructed it to the order of the late Professor Moriarty” (“EH” 808–9). Interestingly, when Moran attacks Holmes at the Reichenbach Falls, he does so with stones, not a gun, as opposed to most screen versions:

another stone struck the very ledge upon which I was stretched, within a foot of my head. Of course, the meaning of this was obvious. Moriarty had not been alone. A confederate – and even that one glance had told me how dangerous a man that confederate was – had kept guard while the Professor had attacked me. From a distance, unseen by me, he had been a witness of his friend’s death and of my escape. He had waited, and then making his way round to the top of the cliff, he had endeavoured to succeed where his comrade had failed. (“EH” 793)

Why was Moran, the marksman, not able to help his friend, why did he let Holmes escape, and why was he throwing stones instead of firing a gun? Noah André Trudeau suggests that Moran was interested in taking over Professor’s organisation (Klinger 793). Still, Doyle’s choice of words – “confederate,” “comrade,” “friend” – may not be accidental,

1 The following abbreviations are used in the paper: “The Adventure of the Empty House” – “EH”, “The Final Problem” – “FP”, “The Adventure of the Illustrious Client” – “IC”, “His Last Bow” – “LB”, “A Scandal in Bohemia” – “SB”, “The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire” – “SV”, “The Reigate Squires” – “RS.”

as they all point to a close relationship between Moran and Moriarty, two outstanding London criminals.

Watson's description of Moran reveals a dangerous man indeed: his shade is "blacker than the blackness of the open door," he is "menacing," and a "sinister figure" ("EH" 803), with face "gaunt and swarthy, scored with deep, savage lines" (804), moving noiselessly – like a big cat hunting: "The man seemed to be beside himself with excitement. His two eyes shone like stars, and his features were working convulsively. He was an elderly man, with a thin, projecting nose, a high, bald forehead, and a huge grizzled moustache" (803). The cat simile is then made explicit: "With his savage eyes and bristling moustache he was wonderfully like a tiger himself" (807). When cornered and caught, the Colonel is only able to say "You cunning, cunning fiend!" and produces "a snarl of rage" (807). In the animal world, tigers are considered to be second only to lions, and even though the only animals Moriarty was compared to are a spider and a reptile ("FP" 719, 720), his position in the crime world was that of a ruler – a lion, with Moran as his second, a tiger. Doyle then reiterates this animalistic link by likening hunting for tigers to the hunt for Moran.² In the end, the old tiger hunter, the best marksman and the (now) most dangerous London criminal is outsmarted by the detective, his side-kick, and his landlady, with a little help from the police, and Moran's extraordinary gun "will embellish the Scotland Yard Museum" ("EH" 815).

Holmes's admiration for Moran's skills and his belief that the Colonel is almost on a par with Moriarty is reinforced in the final set of his adventures collected as *The Case Book of Sherlock Holmes* (1927) when he responds to a client: "If your man is more dangerous than the late Professor Moriarty, or than the living Colonel Sebastian Moran, then he is indeed worth meeting" ("IC" 1452). Following his retirement, Holmes is reminded of "The old sweet song" of "I shall get level with you!": "How often have I heard it in days gone by. It was a favourite ditty of the late lamented Professor Moriarty. Colonel Sebastian Moran has also been known to warble it. And yet I live and keep bees upon the South Downs" ("LB" 1440). The detective lives on and has outlived his creator; Holmes's arch-enemy outgrew the canonical depiction, but Moriarty's top henchman is being demoted, step by step.

Guy Ritchie seems to have presented Sebastian Moran (Paul Anderson) fairly close to Doyle's character. *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* depicts "a gun for hire" (SH:GS) as younger but not less experienced; this time, however, it is the former soldier, Watson, that provides information on the "best marksman in the British army" who received a "dishonourable discharge." Ritchie's Moran speaks French and German and expresses some interest in classical music – he voices disappointment at not being able to attend a planned operation in the opera, which might be a brief reference to Doyle's original description: "An opera hat was pushed to the back of his head, and an evening dress shirt-front gleamed out through his open overcoat" ("EH" 803–4).

Moran manages other mercenaries, provides Moriarty with codes, information, and tickets; it is he who invites Holmes to see Moriarty after John's wedding; but above all, he

2 In a Soviet TV series based on Doyle's stories, the adaptation of "The Empty House" is entitled "Hunt for the Tiger" (1980).

is a marksman who murders Hoffmanstahl, Meinhard, and René. In two of these cases, he uses poisoned darts, which might be a reference to Moran-poisoner from *Terror by Night*. The Colonel's fondness for military novelties is best summarised by himself in the weapon factory in Heilbronn: "That's what you get, Mr Holmes, when industry marries arts. Now, put your gun down. It's a bit old-fashioned" (*SH:GS*). Even though in this version the Colonel resembles Moriarty's valet rather than a friend, he remains an excellent marksman dealing with the most strategic cases, whose steady nerves and keen eye equal those of the literary original ("EH" 812). The plot ends with Moran at large – it remains to be seen whether he will feature in the sequel.

While Ritchie offers his reinterpretation of Holmesian characters by re-shuffling various tones present in Doyle's original, the next two adaptations shift towards modernity and transplant the characters to our reality. *Elementary* introduces Sebastian Moran in a way that suggests he might be Moriarty himself: "M. – a simple monogram for a complicated monster," "methodical, sufficient and clean," "madman," leaving "no footprints, no witnesses, no nothing" ("M."). He killed thirty seven unconnected people in the same manner but the police still have no clue as to his appearance. He is British and is a football fan who watches matches even when preparing a crime scene or spending time with a woman. Perhaps significantly, he was given the face and body of Vinnie Jones, an ex-footballer-turned-actor, as brash and working-class as Doyle's Moran was cautious and aristocratic – a bruiser, not a hunter. What connects the literary Colonel to M. is their military past – M. is an ex-Royal Marine. The big cat comparison is reflected only in a note for Holmes: "You are a mouse chasing a lion" ("M."), which points to a bigger fish and a bigger game.

Similarly to the literary original, in which "Moriarty supplied [Moran] liberally with money" ("EH" 813), this hired killer also has money, as evidenced by his vintage driving gloves and expensive shoes. Holmes's wrangle with Sebastian is about Irene Adler, who he believes to have been killed by M.; however, it turns out M. does not stand for Moran but for Moriarty, Sebastian's new employer. The two criminals are neither on a par nor on speaking terms. Even more interestingly, Moran has a wrangle with Moriarty who first used and then sold him out – at one point Sebastian says to Sherlock: "I want him because he set me up to be caught by you. You want him because he killed your girl" ("M."). The outcome is a seemingly unlikely cooperation between Holmes and Moran against Moriarty, who does not give in that easily: criminal mastermind with a web of informants and accomplices is capable of an effective blackmail which results in Moran's decision to take his own life. Doyle's Colonel "was always a man of iron nerve" ("EH" 812); this modern counterpart is not. Not only is he not Moriarty's "bosom friend" ("EH" 801), he is not even a confederate; the dangerous criminal turns into a police collaborator and the last we hear of him is: "he won't last the night" ("A Landmark Story"). Moran is reduced to a pawn in Moriarty's "catch Sherlock" game.

The creators of *Sherlock* seem to treat Moran as a prime subject for a bit of a cat-and-mouse game to be played with the series' fandom. In November 2012, during an event entitled "The Game is On: An Afternoon with Mark Gatiss & Friends," when asked how Moran will be portrayed in the series since he has not yet been introduced, Gatiss "replied with his evil little smirk, 'Hasn't he?'" After referring to the canon, he concluded: "I can't

say any more or it would spoil the surprise” – to which Moffat added: “Or the *lack* of it” (DeVere, original emphasis). In 2014, queried about Moran “as a threat,” Moffat asked “Who says there’s a Sebastian Moran involved?” (“Steven Moffat And Mark Gatiss Talk Sherlock Series 3”).

While the colonel as a person is conspicuously absent, some traces of Doyle’s character are scattered throughout the series. Moran-marksman can be found in “The Blind Banker” and in “The Great Game” – targeting the would-be victims, also in the pool scene that bridges series 1 and 2 (“A Scandal in Belgravia”); he may also be one of the “four top international assassins [who] relocate to within spitting distance of two hundred and twenty-one B” (“The Reichenbach Fall”). Moran-the right hand might be the little girl’s kidnapper or the sniper aiming at John. His surname is given to Lord Moran, Minister for Overseas Development, which is reminiscent of Sebastian’s father from Doyle’s text: Sir Augustus Moran, “once British Minister to Persia” (“EH” 812). His contemporary counterpart, “pillar of the establishment, has been working for North Korea since 1996,” thus he is a mole, whom Sherlock labels “the big rat, rat number one” (“The Empty Hearses”).³ Just like Doyle’s Colonel, the terrorist rat is arrested, but whether the Guy-Fawkes-like attempt at blowing up the Parliament was his own, North Korea’s or Moriarty’s doing is open to discussion. Last but not least, there is a trained intelligence agent and an assassin, whose employers are yet unknown, a great shot aka Mary Morstan – John’s wife, who gets into the picture after Sherlock’s disappearance. She is the one who shoots Holmes, and later is lured into the empty houses to be exposed; however, she is not imprisoned but accepted by both Sherlock and John. Although her links with Doyle’s character may be the strongest, the detective’s real opponent in the third series is the ingenious master blackmailer, Charles Augustus Magnussen (Doyle’s Milverton), another male villain.

Theories about Moran’s identity, fanfiction included, multiply within the series’ fandom. Online petitions supporting casting certain actors as Sebastian are organised (Maloney), and various versions of Moriarty-Moran relationship are being created (“The second most dangerous man in London”). All this reveals not only the creativity of *Sherlock’s* recipients, however farfetched it may sometimes seem, but also the need among the series’ fans for Moran to feature in it. Moffat and Gatiss present the most palimpsestuous version of Sherlock Holmes, one that excels at combining the original stories with their adaptations and modern audience expectations, and since they have ideas for two more series (“20 Sherlock Series 3 Secrets”), the viewers and academics have to wait patiently – another element of the scattered bits and pieces of Sebastian Moran may yet reveal itself.

Neo-Victorianism feeds on what is absent from the official Victorian discourse, and since Doyle described the Moran-Moriarty relation very briefly and introduced the Colonel after Moriarty’s death, recent screen adaptations thrive on presenting what the Victorian readers and later audiences did not receive. By engaging in reinterpreting and rediscovering the canon, they offer a revision of the relationship between the first and second most dangerous men in London while Moriarty was still alive.

3 That and the name of the tube station with the bomb-carriage are references to “the giant rat of Sumatra, a story for which the world is not yet prepared” (“SV” 1556) and “the colossal schemes” of a baron connected with “the Netherland-Sumatra Company” (“RS” 557).

There remains one additional piece of the demoting puzzle that has to be taken into consideration: Irene Adler. Doyle mentions Moriarty only employing Moran in “high-class jobs” (“EH” 813), and after Moriarty’s death Moran decides to avenge him and kill Holmes. However, recent revisions of the canon seem to prefer placing Irene as Moriarty’s agent – while she might not be a great shot, she is capable of manipulating and deceiving the detective. In his discussion of Holmes’s friends and enemies, Phillip Tallon placed her on the latter’s side, labelling her as “the most innocuous form of enemy”: a competitor (69). The only person who outwitted the famous detective has “the face of the most beautiful of women” but also “the mind of the most resolute of men” (“SB” 18). She is clever, resourceful, and independent, and in all the aforementioned titles both her talents and her sex are being used by Moriarty to get to Holmes: in *Sherlock Holmes*, her role is to make the sleuth find things for the Professor; in *Elementary*, she is Moriarty’s alter-ego, used to get to know the detecting genius and work him out; in *Sherlock*, she is hired by “the consulting criminal” (“A Scandal in Belgravia”) to get information for him. Apparently, even though reaching Holmes is a high-class job, Sebastian Moran is not the man for it – Moriarty needs Irene Adler, another extraordinary criminal: an adventuress, an art forger, and a blackmailer.

Is Moran not cunning enough to deceive Holmes? Judging by the source text, he is not, since the detective traces him, with some help from his landlady and Watson solves the case of the recent murder, avoids getting killed, and hands the culprit to the cooperating police. The only characters who do not get “solved” or mentally defeated in the canon are Irene Adler and Professor Moriarty. Modern audiences seem to need strong women to surround Sherlock Holmes and the detective to be not only brainy, but also capable of some kind of romantic involvement with such a woman. Irene’s recent appearances partly fulfil that need. Machismo belongs to the past, hence to get to Holmes, Moriarty resorts to using womanly charms; however, such a manoeuvre is not, in fact, “sympathetic to women and to a feminist view” (Vanacker 99) – it merely demotes his original confederate. From Moriarty’s friend, through his agent, to a pawn in his game, and even a scattered personality – such has been the neo-Victorian fate of Sebastian Moran, at least until now.

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Streszczenie

Artykuł omawia współczesne adaptacje postaci pułkownika Sebastiana Morana, współpracownika profesora Moriarty’ego, arcyłotra z tekstów o Sherlocku Holmesie. Podczas gdy Doyle przedstawił go jako przyjaciela i prawą rękę profesora („Pusty dom”), neowiktoriańskie wersje filmowe i telewizyjne redukują jego rolę do najemnego zabójcy (*Sherlock Holmes. Gra cieni*), pionka w grze swego zleceniodawcy (*Elementary*), a nawet prezentują jego „rozproszoną” wersję (*Sherlock*, serie 1–3). Powodem może być fakt, że istotnym elementem neowiktoriańskich adaptacji i nawiązań jest rozwijanie kobiecych postaci drugoplanowych, które dodatkowo często przejmują cechy męskich bohaterów. Nie bez znaczenia jest też fakt, że w przeciwieństwie do Moriarty’ego czy Irene Adler, u Doyle’a Moran został „przejrzany” przez Holmesa i oddany w ręce policji.