

The Napoleon of Crime Steampunked: Professor Moriarty according to Doyle, Moore & O'Neill, and Ritchie

Professor Moriarty, the legendary archenemy of Sherlock Holmes, is getting more and more dangerous. He has always been treacherous but his schemes and actions, dodgy as they were, have never been conducted on such a massive scale and using such advanced weaponry and techniques as in the twenty-first century. The fact that Arthur Conan Doyle presented only a sketch of Moriarty's personality and an outline of his abilities allows for an almost unlimited literary and cinematographic artistic licence, especially in the era of Neo-Victorianism and Steampunk. It is relatively easy to please contemporary action movie audiences with a villain who is an updated version of a Victorian; it seems that Guy Ritchie's Moriarty owes as much to Doyle and the literary original as to Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill and their steampunked version of the nefarious Professor.

In steampunk literature, "our projections and fantasies about the Victorian era meet the tropes and techniques of science fiction, to produce a genre that revels in anachronism while exposing history's overlapping layers" (Bowser et al.: 2010, 1) Although the first generation of steampunk writers published their texts as far back as the 1970s, the genre gained immense popularity at the beginning of the current century, and – with the growth of steampunk fashion, gadgets, and even music – became a subculture. Its roots, however, can be traced back to the nineteenth century and its interest in science and scientists (Nevins: 2008). Jules Verne and H. G. Wells are names known to probably all contemporary readers, yet not all of them may be aware of the direct link established between the novels these authors produced and present-day steampunk literature. Arthur Conan Doyle's detective fiction and his characters have been given a new life in a different specialization.

The few pieces of information about Moriarty that Doyle's readers are given can be found in only two texts out of fifty six stories and four novels. Knowing that the Professor is considered to be Holmes' archenemy, one would expect more. In *The Final Problem* (1893), the twenty fifth tale in the whole series, Doctor Watson feels obliged "to tell for the first time what really took place between Professor Moriarty and Mr. Sherlock Holmes" (2003, vol. I 737). He himself has never heard of Moriarty (738) and it is Holmes who introduces the character. The detective is nervous, "looking even paler and thinner than usual" (737) and afraid of "air-guns" (738), yet able to present a brief curriculum vitae of the man who "pervades London" (739). James Moriarty is a man of good birth, excellent education, and possesses a phenomenal mathematical faculty on the one hand, but also "hereditary tendencies of the most diabolical kind" (739) on the other; a former university professor and an army coach; he is not a doer, but a thinker, who controls a well-organized army of agents – a criminal mastermind behind "half that is evil and of nearly all that is undetected in this great city", "the Napoleon of crime" (740):

He is extremely tall and thin, his forehead domes out in a white curve, and his two eyes are deeply sunken in his head. He is clean-shaven, pale and ascetic-looking, retaining something of the professor in his features. His shoulders are rounded from much study, and his face protrudes forward and is forever slowly oscillating from side to side in a curious reptilian fashion. He peered at me with great curiosity in his puckered eyes. (741)

Despite being abhorred by Moriarty's crimes, Holmes admires their author – he has finally met “an antagonist who [is his] intellectual equal” (740) and thinks he can entrap him. Moriarty is aware of that and does not care for being watched. The two geniuses meet, and it is the Professor who pays the detective a visit; the next time they see each other they are fighting to death at the Reichenbach Falls.¹

The Adventure of the Empty House (1903) brings Holmes back to the readers, explains how he escaped death, but also introduces Colonel Sebastian Moran, “once of Her Majesty's Indian Army, and the best heavy-game shot that our Eastern Empire has ever produced” (775). He seems to be the link between Doyle's and our times, being the owner of a “powerful air-gun”, “an admirable and unique weapon”, “noiseless and of tremendous power” (775-776). Ordered by Moriarty and constructed by one Von Herder, “the blind German mechanic” (776), this weapon must have stirred the imagination of contemporary authors and fans. As steampunk is largely defined by its use of gadgets and hyper-technology, the idea of ordering such a device seems to have transformed Moriarty the Maths Professor into Moriarty-Steampunked. This is the version that appears in the work of the Moore-O'Neill duo.

The well-known nineteenth-century literary characters meeting in 1898 and constituting *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2000) are: Mina Harker, née Murray, Allan Quatermain, Captain Nemo, Dr. Jekyll/ Mr. Hyde, and Hawley Griffin. There is also a mysterious “gentleman who's known by his initial (...): Mr M.” (Moore et al. 2000: n.p.), working, as it turns out, for Her Majesty's Military Intelligence, Division 5 and employing Mr. Bond.² The latter's task is to assemble the eponymous league for the former's own purposes: to find cavorite, the anti-gravity material invented for the 1900 lunar exhibition but stolen by an “absolute crime king of London's East End”, “very much like Satan” (Moore et al. n.p.) and known as the Doctor. When the league succeed, Bond visits his superior and it is in their conversation that with the simple “Call me James” (Moore et al. n.p.) M's identity is revealed.

A flashback takes the graphic novel readers to the Reichenbach Falls, where they follow an extended version of the scene depicted by Doyle in *The Final Problem*. The original events are narrated by Dr. Watson, who did not witness the meeting of the two brilliant men nor their fight: his knowledge of what happened is mostly based on a note left by Holmes. In Moore's account, the detective and the professor exchange a few sentences that reveal concomitant mutual admiration and aversion, at the same time illustrating the writer's skilful rendering of the original text and the legend it created. At one point Holmes comments that their “situation has the disaffected beauty of a chess game” (Moore et al. n.p.), meeting Moriarty's complete approval. Having written the note to Watson, Sherlock is ready to fight

¹ Moriarty as a leader of criminal underworld is mentioned in *The Valley of Fear* (1915), the fourth Holmes novel. Its plot predates *The Final Problem* (1893), in which Watson heard about the Professor for the first time; yet when asked about him, the Doctor answers: “The famous scientific criminal as famous among crooks (...) as he is unknown to the public” (2003 vol. II: 164). This contradiction, as well as Moriarty's involvement in the plot – crucial to the ending but minor as far as his appearance in the story is concerned – do not influence contemporary steampunked themes and consequently are beyond the scope of the present paper.

² Being a postmodern pastiche, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* includes numerous references to pop culture, majority of which, ingenious though they are, are also beyond the scope of the present paper and will not be discussed.

“to the death” (Moore et al. n.p.). The extension includes seeing both Holmes and Moriarty escaping death, with the former climbing up the rocks and the latter rescued by his men: Moran and Bond. While the colonel, “the best we have in Military Intelligence group five” (Moore et al. n.p.), follows the detective, Bond stays with the professor, who expresses his surprise that Holmes “thought me...an enemy...of the state... never reasoning...that it might suit the state...to create...its own enemy. Shadowboxing. Bond. We’re all just...shadowboxing.” (Moore et al. n.p.) The chess and the shadowboxing themes are some of the links between Moore’s and Ritchie’s versions and will be discussed shortly.

Back in 1898, Moriarty ponders on his first steps in MI5: recruited while at university – Doyle’s former professor of mathematics, then an army coach – he became “the obvious choice” when the division decided to “manufacture a **crime-lord** through whom they could control and monitor the **underworld**” (Moore et al. n.p., original emphasis). Now, being both the director of intelligence and a criminal, his aim is to destroy the rival criminal figure, the Doctor: “I rule London’s **West End**. He controls the **East**.” (Moore et al. n.p., original emphasis) The conversation is not as secret as the professor would like – Griffin, the invisible man, sent by captain Nemo, has been eavesdropping and is ready to report the news to the members of the league.

Relating what he heard, Griffin describes M as a “[t]all, thin chap with eyes like a lizard. Very prominent brow...” (Moore et al. n.p.), which is reminiscent of Doyle’s description of Moriarty’s eyes “deeply sunken in his head” and his “reptilian fashion” (741). It should be stressed that unlike many of Moriarty’s personifications, O’Neill’s rendition of the professor’s appearance is very similar to the original illustrations by Sidney Paget in *The Strand*³: he looks old and frail, yet his eyes are expressive. It is captain Nemo who pieces everything together and informs others that they have been working for “one James Moriarty, sometimes known as the Napoleon of crime...” (Moore et al. n.p.), who plans to bomb East End using cavorite’s anti-gravity qualities.

What follows is the air fight between the Doctor’s war-kites and aerial cannon, the Professor’s war airship, Captain Nemo’s balloon and “mechanical **harpoon** guns of [his] own device” (Moore et al. n.p., original emphasis). While it is Quatermain who attacks Moriarty, it is Mina, the league’s leader, who attacks the cavorite. Trying to save it, Moriarty goes overboard; however, unlike in the *Final Problem*, where he supposedly ended his life falling down into the waterfall, here he goes up into the sky, holding to the anti-gravity material. After James Moriarty’s death (or disappearance?), another M becomes the head of intelligence – Mycroft Holmes, Sherlock’s brother.

Steampunk is said to lend a “futuristic shape to stories and images from our cultural past” (Jones 117), and in *The League* it transforms Doyle’s pretty general phrases – “powerful air-gun”, “an admirable and unique weapon”, “noiseless and of tremendous power” (775-776) – into a whole range of apparently advanced weaponry at both the heroes and the villains disposal. Moore’s Professor Moriarty gets new life and new technical possibilities: his mathematical past is long forgotten, and his genius seems to be applied only while scheming. What matters is the Napoleon of crime’s plan to capture the latest invention and modify it to serve as military hardware. In James Dale Robinson’s screenplay for the graphic novel’s screen adaptation, even that is excelled.

On the one hand, the film version of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2003) has been immensely criticised, and even repudiated by Alan Moore (VanderMeer et al. 2011: 188); on the other,

³ One of the tiny yet significant details in the adaptation of the comic is the use of “The Strand” as a prop: it has apparently been read by Allan Quatermain, the leader of the league in the film version.

films like that “invest some honest effort into conveying a consistent and interesting Steampunk aesthetic” (VanderMeer et al. 188), and it is the steampunk aesthetic that is one of the few qualities the graphic novel and the film *M* share.

Among numerous differences between Moore’s and Robinson’s *League* one cannot overlook *M*’s multi-functionality. While in the graphic novel *M* is the mastermind ruling London’s West End criminal underworld, commissioning others, for example Bond or Moran, to do his bidding, and fighting the East End Doctor, the film’s *M* is: 1) James Moriarty, 2) *M*, gathering members of the league to foil one Phantom’s plans, 3) the Phantom himself. Playing so many roles demands hero-like qualities, and one may wonder if *M*, being pretty extraordinary himself, really needs a league of extraordinary gentlemen and a gentlewoman. Yet he does, obviously for military reasons: “In the war to come, I intend to wield the greatest weapon of all: the power of the league itself” (*The League...*). With the help of a blackmailed spy, Dorian Gray, *M* collects the elements he needs: Captain Nemo’s science, the invisible man’s skin sample, Jekyll’s potion, and Mina’s blood. Quatermain, an ordinary mortal, could not add any of his skills, except for being the only man who could have captured Hyde.

What *M* wants is war – war on an unprecedented scale – a world war. His steps to achieve his aim include: using “German soldiers” to attack the Bank of England and “British soldiers” to attack a zeppelin factory in Berlin and kidnap German scientists, an attempt to blow up Venice during the supposed secret meeting organized by politicians to avoid military conflict, and, last but not least, creating “invisible spies, an army of Hydes, vampiric assassins” (*The League*). Being a villain, he cannot succeed, but what he says is worryingly prophetic: “War will come, sooner or later, as inevitable as summer into autumn.” Or: “There’ll be others like me. You can’t kill the future” (*The League*). The year is 1899, the country most advanced militarily appears to be Germany. Even though the cooperation of Moriarty with a German gun-maker was mentioned by Doyle, the knowledge of what happened in 1914 does add yet another layer to the steampunk presentation of the past.

The steampunk “omnipresence of ornate scientific equipment” (Jones 101) is apparent throughout the film, probably even more strongly than in the graphic novel: tanks in the opening scene, zeppelins, machine guns, the remote private factory producing “*M*’s weapons of destruction” (*The League*). Steampunk fans appear to be happy with these: “there are several moments of pleasure, including depictions of a rather splendid German zeppelin factory and the first appearance of Captain Nemo’s submarine” (VanderMeer 189). While the league members’ gadgets are also highly advanced, it is the scope of the destructive elements that seems to be overshadowing all others. Has not military technology always been a step ahead?

In one of the final scenes, *M* confirms what Quatermain has already discovered: he is “James Moriarty, the so-called Napoleon of crime. That man died at Reichenbach Falls. He died and I was reborn” (*The League*). However, unlike Doyle’s, or even Moore’s, mathematical genius of good birth and excellent education who became a criminal, Norrington’s Moriarty/ *M*/ the Phantom is much younger, much more aggressive, and much more interested in war and technology. He is more than just steampunked, he is also hollywoodized.

Moriarty as depicted by Lionel Wigram, the man behind the *Sherlock Holmes* (2009) story directed by Guy Ritchie, is the criminal mastermind from Doyle’s writing: a man whose face is hidden in the shadows, who is interested in the latest firearms, and who is in charge of a whole network of criminals. He is also able to manipulate, or even blackmail, others into fulfilling his plans, and this

characteristic, or actually the way he undertakes his actions, is reminiscent of Moore's M's schemes. In the graphic novel, James Moriarty, called a "monogrammatic superior" M (Moore et al. n.p.), via Bond and via Mina, gathers under false pretences a few extraordinary gentlemen to find favorite, the latest technical invention, only to use it as a weapon against his enemy. In *Sherlock Holmes*, James Moriarty, a mysterious man equipped with a tiny and well-hidden gun, hires Irene Adler to manipulate Holmes into finding a scientist who is "essential to [Moriarty's] plan" (*Sherlock Holmes*), since the Napoleon of crime is interested in what the scientist was making for Lord Blackwood, another villain. The invention happens to be the first ever chemical weapon that "will revolutionize warfare" (*Sherlock Holmes*). The Professor, however, needs only its small but powerful piece: "the wire-free invention" (*Sherlock Holmes*) enabling him to design weapons much more powerful than the one constructed by Von Herder from *The Adventure of the Empty House*.

Sherlock Holmes divided the audience: Holmes purists' criticism and Ritchie's fans' praise often lack references to steampunk – fortunately, steampunk fans notice the typical elements of the genre and see the bigger picture:

The payoff comes when an old [sic] adversary appears, along with perhaps the most Steampunkian doomsday device created for any recent movie. In all ways, *Sherlock Holmes* manages to sustain the level of invention promised but not fulfilled by the film version of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. It also suggests that a big Hollywood blockbuster can fulfill audience expectations of large-scale entertainment, while still providing ample space for surprises of a Steampunk variety. (VanderMeer et al. 193-194)

Unfortunately, the author of these words seems to have overlooked that in the film version, even though Holmes deduces that Irene Adler's employer must be a professor, it is she who informs Sherlock about his identity: "Moriarty. That's his name. And he is a Professor. (...) Please don't underestimate him. He's just as brilliant as you are and indefinitely more devious" (*Sherlock Holmes*). Still, the final scene presents the detective as pretty confident as to the very person of the professor and his plans. The latter were revealed to the audience two years later in a sequel written by Kieran Mulroney and entitled *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011).

Like the first part, *A Game of Shadows* has been highly criticised, for example for placing Holmes in "today's world of short attention spans, nonreading, and lovable, cantankerous heroes", or "plunder[ing] the story *The Final Problem* by Arthur Conan Doyle" (Macklin n.p.). It can be argued, however, that even to a greater degree than its predecessor, *Game's* plot and the character of the Professor were a combination of both the original story and steampunk culture, especially as presented in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* – the graphic novel and its film adaptation.

The graphic novel is set in "troubled times, where fretful dreams settle upon the Empire's Brow" (Moore et al. n.p.); its film version depicts "nations striking at nations" (*The League*); the latest *Sherlock* begins with Watson's narrative: "The year was 1891. Storm clouds were brewing over Europe. France and Germany were at each other throats, the result of a series of bombings. Some said it was nationalists, others – the anarchists but as usual my friend, Sherlock Holmes, had a different theory entirely" (*A Game*). The detective's theory is that the mastermind behind the recent affairs is James Moriarty, commented to Watson in words none other than "the Napoleon of crime" (*A Game*). The main elements of the plot follow those from Doyle's *The Final Problem*: Holmes is working on figuring out the Professor's international schemes – the 'spider's web' he created in the study, and he is aware of

being under observation; Moriarty knows the detective is hot on his heels – he complains about it to Irene Alder just a few seconds before poisoning her; when the two geniuses meet, Moriarty warns, or rather threatens Holmes, and their last meeting takes place in Reichenbach, Switzerland, where they fight – it ends with Moriarty’s death in the fall. There is also the character of a great shooter, Colonel Sebastian Moran from Doyle’s *The Adventure of the Empty House*. Apart from the introduction of the steampunk elements, the differences include Watson being familiar with some details from the Professor’s life, which is a logical consequence of the ending of the first part,⁴ or the scene of one more meeting between Holmes and Moriarty in a German weapon factory.

Borrowings from the graphic novel include Holmes describing his relation with Moriarty as “a shadowy game”, and the two playing a game of chess before the fight; Mycroft, Sherlock’s brother, works for Her Majesty’s Secret Service; the Professor lives a double life – not as the head of Secret Service, however, but as an academic: he invites Holmes to meet him at the college after a lecture, and later goes on a lecture tour on the continent. The futuristic references, even if not as ornate as steampunk rules would dictate, are more apparent: bombings, guns, machine pistols, chemical weaponry, or the factory, where, according to Sebastian Moran “industry marries art” (*A Game*). They even may seem too visible and too loud. The film *League* borrowings include: an international peace summit – this time not in Venice and ‘for real’; biological experiments – this time surgical, not ‘extraordinary’; the Professor being not old but rather middle-aged. The greatest similarity, however, seems to be the way Moriarty’s motifs are presented: what he wants is to cause a world war and, consequently, make money – in his words, “to own bullets and bandages” (*A Game*). To discourage Holmes, or maybe to have the last word, he also says: “you’re not fighting me, so much as you are the human condition. (...) War on an industrial scale is inevitable. They’ll do it themselves within a few years. All I have to do is wait” (*A Game*). This passage looks and sounds eerily familiar, since it is a paraphrase of the film *M*’s almost last words: “War will come, sooner or later, as inevitable as summer into autumn. (...) There’ll be others like me. You can’t kill the future” (*The League*).

Like the first part, *A Game* also has “got that Guy Ritchie feeling to it”.⁵ It is apparent on the action level, but noticeable in the treatment of violence as well: Ritchie’s Moriarty is not only a cunning criminal, but also a fighter – “the former boxing champion of Cambridge” (*A Game*) – and a sadist. The scene in the factory, when Holmes is being tortured to the sounds of Schubert’s *Trout*, is the greatest departure from the original figure of the criminal mastermind; moreover, it is far from the technology and culture of steampunk as well. It may be labelled as one of the “odd Ritchie-ism[s]” (Shoard n.p.), complementing the energetic Holmes-Watson duo.

Arthur Conan Doyle created three characters that will not be forgotten: a detective, a doctor and a professor. The last of these seems to have gained importance despite – or maybe actually because of – an extremely brief characteristic, scant references and mere two meetings with the main character. As the shadowy genius has gained fame as Holmes’ legendary archenemy, his interest in weaponry forms the springboard for bringing him into the steampunk world, a world “[o]ne part Victorian, one part science, one part noir” (Bowser et al. 26). Such a world constitutes a great environment for the nineteenth-century character, who is a former academic and army coach that now rules the criminal

⁴ It could also indicate a reference to *The Valley of Fear* – see footnote 1.

⁵ This is Rachel Adams’ (actress playing Irene Adler) phrase, taken from additional materials available on the Blu-ray edition of *Sherlock Holmes*.

underworld. Moore and O'Neill combined modern and postmodern elements, like MI5, the pseudonym M and a co-operator Bond, with steampunk aesthetics and technological innovations, which has broadened, or rather advanced, Moriarty's influences and made him more dangerous. The *League* filmmakers have brought all that a step further, equipping Moriarty not only with updated guns, but also with an idea of a world war that could be won by a would-be army of extraordinary and supernatural fighters. Last but not least, Guy Ritchie has combined the original texts and their steampunk adaptations, added weapons of mass destruction and presented all that in an action movie, entertaining even wider audiences. In all the examples discussed in the paper, regardless of the medium and convention – be it a detective story, steampunk graphic novel, or an action movie, James Moriarty is referred to by means of Doyle's phrase "the Napoleon of crime", and that is how he will be remembered.

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STRESZCZENIE: Artykuł omawia postać arcywroga Sherlocka Holmesa, Jamesa Moriartiego, a właściwie jej nowoczesne odmiany. Nieliczne opowiadania i powieści, w których słynny detektyw zmaga się z profesorem, zawierają na tyle ogólny opis "Napoleona zbrodni" zainteresowanego najnowszymi militarnymi wynalazkami, że staje się on idealną wprost pożywką dla steampunku – konwencji ewoluującej epokę wiktoriańską, zwłaszcza osiągnięcia naukowe i wynalazki tego okresu. Na podstawie tekstów Arthura Conan Doyle'a oraz komiksu Allana Moore'a i Kevina O'Neilla można wywnioskować, że ostatnie filmy wyreżyserowane przez Guya Ritchie – *Sherlock Holmes* (2009) i *Sherlock Holmes: gra cieni* (2011), tak często i chętnie krytykowane, są nie tylko kinem akcji, ale przede wszystkim ciekawym połączeniem oryginału i steampunku.