“Petticoated Police,” “Intimate Watching” and Private Agency(ies)

Reading the Female Detective of
Fin-de-siècle British Literature

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Abstract

In April 1894, the Times Column of New Books and New Editions introduced to its readers “a Female Sherlock Holmes” (12). This was Loveday Brooke, in C. L. Pirkis’s collection The Experiences of Loveday Brooke, Lady Detective. Loveday is one of many professional female detectives who traversed the pages of short stories, both serialised and in collections, during the British fin de siècle. The advertisement suggests that Loveday was portrayed as a female version of a masculine character type, typified by Holmes. In this thesis, I question this assumption as part of my literary ‘investigation’ of the fin-de-siècle female detective.

Currently, there is only a small body of work on the nineteenth-century female detective and she remains “mysterious” and “little-known,” as William Stephens Hayward describes his protagonist in Revelations of a Lady Detective (1864). This thesis employs ‘investigation’ as a structural and methodological framework to perform its own literary analysis and to make an original contribution to extant critical literature. Investigation provides an effective mode for the examination and articulation of how this figure is portrayed.

The narrative trajectory of this thesis shares the key stages of the fictional female detective’s investigation: the identification of evidence, consideration of its significance and meaning, and deduction based thereon. I read three collections of short stories, each featuring a professional female detective, published in Britain between 1893 and 1901, and treat the literary techniques in these texts as ‘clues’ to representation. Thus, double meanings, metaphors, and analogy, are the proof of a complex chain of “legal, social, moral, institutional and gendered practices” that shaped the representation of female detectives (Kestner 1). In Chapter One, I use vision and related concepts in the analysis of C. L. Pirkis’s Loveday Brooke. The second stage of my literary investigation focuses upon disguise and I read George R. Sims’s Dorcas Dene, Detective: Her Life and Adventures (1897). Dorcas’s
facility with disguise transcends mere detective work as it is also portrayed as a means of negotiating fin-de-siècle social mores. The final chapter considers the ratiocinations performed by Florence Cusack in the fiction of L. T. Meade (1899-1901). I consider the interaction between the female detective and contemporary discourses about women’s mental faculties.

Each chapter explores a different element of the female detective’s investigation, revealing the ways in which Pirkis, Sims and Meade use elements of the detective plot to engage with, and subtly counter, contemporary gender discourses. Each detective transcends the proposed status of a “Female Sherlock Holmes,” as each is an important character in her own right. The detective plot essays female professionalism and independence, expanding the roles allocated to women in nineteenth-century British fiction.
Statement of Originality

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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