

Chapter 7

IN THE CLOSET OF SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE: *THE PRIVATE LIFE OF SHERLOCK HOLMES (1970)*

"I should have been more daring. I have this theory. I wanted to have Holmes homosexual and not admitting it to anyone, including maybe even himself. The burden of keeping it secret was the reason he took dope."

—Billy Wilder¹

Watson: "I hope I'm not being presumptuous, but there *have* been women in your life?"

Holmes: "The answer is yes. You're being presumptuous."

—From *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*

About halfway through the episodic *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*, the famous detective (Robert Stephens), his trusted companion, Dr. Watson (Colin Blakely), and their client, the Belgian Gabrielle Valladon (Geneviève Page), take an overnight train to Inverness, Scotland, where they hope to find a trace of Gabrielle's missing engineer husband, Emile. Pretending to be Mr. and Mrs. Ashdown, Holmes and Gabrielle share a sleeping compartment, while Watson, disguised as their valet, travels in third class. As Holmes in the upper berth and Gabrielle below him get ready for sleep, the conversation turns to the topic of women, and the following exchange ensues:

Gabrielle: "Women are never entirely to be trusted—not the best of them."

Holmes: "What did you say?"

Gabrielle: "I didn't say it—you did. According to Dr. Watson."

Holmes: "Oh!"

Gabrielle: "He gave me some old copies of Strand Magazine."

Holmes: "The good doctor is constantly putting words into my mouth."

Gabrielle: "Then you deny it?"

Holmes: "Not at all. I am not a whole-hearted admirer of womankind."

As the scene continues, Holmes's last words prove to be something of an understatement as he explains his deep mistrust of women to stem from various serious firsthand disappointments, ranging from a passionate laboratory affair instigated by a woman planning to "steal cyanide to sprinkle on her husband's steak and kidney pie" to his own engagement broken off due to his fiancée's succumbing to influenza twenty-four hours before the wedding—an experience which Holmes claims merely to prove that "women are unreliable and not to be trusted." The coldheartedness in these remarks reveals a bitter sense of betrayal and disappointment, which actually dates back to his student days in Oxford as a flashback underscores (significantly omitted from the released version). In it, we see a young Holmes winning a lottery organized by members of his crew team—a visit with a local prostitute who turns out to be the very same young girl Holmes had long naively adored from afar. The shock of this experience, Holmes tells Valladon, has taught him a valuable lesson: "Any emotional involvement warps your judgment and clouds your reason."

The image of Holmes as wavering between being suspicious of women and being an outright misogynist is of course familiar from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's fiction. The stories and novels that speak of Holmes's achievement as master detective, almost all of them told as first-person narratives by his collaborator Dr. Watson, are sprinkled with Holmes's derogatory asides about women, the importance of not letting emotions diminish one's faculties of reasoning and deduction, as well as a barely disguised disapproval of Watson's own marriage(s).² In Wilder's film, however, Holmes's relation to women, and the very question of his sexual preference, take center stage. What is private in the life of Sherlock Holmes, the film suggests, revolves very much around the detective's love life, or lack thereof, while Holmes's use of cocaine, often alluded to in Doyle's fiction, is presented here as a habit to console for failed relationships.

The scene on the train to Inverness recalls two other Wilder films in which masquerading characters aboard overnight trains barely keep their sexuality in check. In Wilder's directorial debut *The Major and the Minor*, full-grown Susan Applegate, pretending to be twelve years old, is invited to share a compartment by unsuspecting Major Kirby, while Joe and Jerry in *Some Like It Hot* have their hands full to keep their libido from tearing up their disguise as bedfellows Josephine and Daphne amid the all-girl band. In both films, some of the characters on the train withhold crucial information from others—pertaining respectively to true age or gender—in order to gain safe passage. This situation is only slightly modified in *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* where Holmes and Valladon are of course traveling as Mr. and Mrs. Ashdown, but with the added twist that Valladon is in fact the German undercover agent Ilse von Hoffmannsthal, who has cleverly enlisted Holmes in her mission to spy on England's secret plans for developing a submarine. Valladon's curiosity about Holmes's interest in women is thus part of her agenda to use her sex appeal in manipulating

the detective, a task which she achieves with bravura, for Holmes never suspects her until his brother Mycroft enlightens him about his deception. Seen in this light, Holmes's inability to see through Valladon's disguise can ironically be attributed to the very clouding of reason through affection about which he lectures her so pompously aboard the train. Yet in a less romantic and nonheterosexual interpretation of the film, Holmes's misreading of Valladon can be attributed to the opposite reason—not a surplus of emotional involvement but a complete lack thereof, and not for reasons of rationality but entirely different ones. For in the first episode of the film, when Holmes meets the famous ballerina Mme. Petrova, he explains his relationship with Watson to be more than mere companionship. And even though he does so apparently only to extricate himself from the uncomfortable position of having to father a child with Petrova, he is reluctant to put to rest Watson's fears that he is indeed not interested in women, as the motto cited above indicates.

The suggestion of Holmes's homosexuality is indeed never entirely dispelled in the film and resurfaces time and again. In the episode "The Curious Case of the Upside Down Room" (eliminated from the final film), an alleged murder mystery concocted by Watson to keep his friend Holmes's mind occupied and off cocaine, Watson and Holmes get into an argument over Holmes's repeated drug use. The imminent breakup of the relationship prompts housekeeper Mrs. Hudson to comment that, "I once went through a divorce myself," thereby likening the two men's living arrange-



Figure 7.1. Watson suspiciously eyes Valladon's advances towards Holmes

ments to a marriage. And she is aghast at the prospect of a woman spending a night in their flat, presumably because such an intrusion would offset the male-male relationship. During this heated exchange Watson also accuses Holmes of moving in with him only for a ready supply of drugs, to which Holmes replies, "Now Watson, you mustn't underestimate your many other charms," finally calming Watson by saying that "in my cold and unemotional way I am very fond of you." The screenplay is full of this sort of innuendo and double entendre. In one particular scene Watson converses with Holmes while the detective is taking a bath, while in another Watson sports a kilt. With his chalky white face, rouged lips, mascara and affected language Holmes suggests an effeminate man (his hairstyle actually reminiscent of Doyle's contemporary Oscar Wilde), and the fact that he is outwitted both by a woman and his more virile brother Mycroft hints at both intellectual inferiority and sexual impotence.³

As in *Some Like It Hot*, Wilder is certainly more interested in suggesting the possibility of a homosexual relationship rather than presenting irrevocable facts; ambiguity is clearly more titillating than certainty. It is furthermore safe to assume that the heirs of Conan Doyle, from whom the right to use his characters were purchased, kept a close watch over the kind of image Wilder and Diamond portrayed of the famous detective and his companion. As it stands, the ambiguity surrounding Holmes's possible homosexuality provides a most fitting subtext for a film about two males involved in an obsessive yet futile search for clues and certainties, in the course of which they repeatedly misread evidence, botch conclusions, and face sudden, unexpected revelations. Thus, the desire for detecting evidence becomes an allegory for indecipherability itself, which is part of a larger critique of instrumental reason and rationality that has tragic consequences for all characters involved. Even though *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* is Wilder's only film that uses as protagonists famous characters created by another author, it can be seen to be one of his most personal films, providing a captivating and emotional reflection on his own career at a moment in his life when he is ready to draw the sum of his existence.

Between Men

The exploits of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson have made them arguably the most famous male couple ever created in fiction, and inspired numerous re-creations by other novelists and filmmakers.⁴ Within Wilder's oeuvre, the detective and his valiant assistant occupy a prominent place among other male buddies who are closely united through habitat, profession, or a monetary or romantic quest.

Indeed, Wilder's first real commercial success was his script for *Ein blonder Traum*, which revolves around two window cleaners, incidentally both called Willy, who become rivals over a woman but reconcile and stay



Figure 7.2. Watson and Holmes, possibly the most famous male friendship in literature

best friends. Male bonding disrupted by the intrusion of a woman is also the key tension of *Double Indemnity*, in which insurance salesman Walter Neff and claims manager Keyes prove to have the most lasting affection in the film. This film, too, suggests more than just male friendship when the dying Neff confesses to Keyes, "I love you too."⁵ In the aforementioned *Some Like It Hot*, jazz musicians Joe and Jerry develop very different feminine personae when forced into drag to escape from the mob; as shown in chapter 6, male bonding is recast here as female rivalry, and ends with the forming both of a heterosexual and a homosexual couple. *Kiss Me, Stupid* also features a pair of musician buddies willing to go to extensive lengths to pursue their goal, namely achieve fame by having a Las Vegas star perform one of their songs. The three Wilder films that pair Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau present the most comic take on male bonding, casting them respectively as injured sports reporter Harry Hinkle and brother-in-law and shyster lawyer Gingrich out to scam an insurance company in *The Fortune Cookie*; as star reporter Hildy Johnson and his editor Walter Burns, who stops short of nothing to prevent Hildy from quitting his job (*The Front Page*); and as depressive Victor Clooney whose plans to commit suicide in a hotel interfere with gunman Trabucco's assignment to rub out a mobster about to serve as witness in a trial (*Buddy Buddy*). The relationship between the various Lemmon and Matthau characters in all three films is one of both rivalry and camaraderie, while the women serve as both antagonist and catalyst in the process of male bonding. Thus Hinkle only agrees to Gingrich's shady plans in order to win back his estranged wife, but when wisened up about her egotism and materialism prefers the

friendship of football player Jackson. Burns' goal is to hinder Hildy from getting married since having a wife threatens to end not only Hildy's career but also his usefulness for Burns. Clooney's depression is attributed to having been left by his wife, a problem that also becomes Trabucco's since he cannot let a suicide draw attention to his mission as killer.

Within the larger context of Wilder's gender politics, male bonding, whether in the form of friendship, mentorship, or amicable rivalry, thus often takes place at the expense of lasting heterosexual relationships. At the same time, however, homosocial bonds do often carry undertones of homophobia. When Detweiler seeks contact with Dr. Vando in order to smuggle his screenplay into Fedora's home, the doctor misunderstands Detweiler's approach as guided by sexual motives, warning him that his earring "should not fool" him. Homophobia is strongest in *The Front Page*, which contains Wilder's most stereotypical portrait of a gay man in the effeminate Bensinger, "a classic mincing fag" as Sikov has called him.⁶ Within the logic of the film, Bensinger serves as counterimage to the virile, tough newspaper man, an example of what may happen to Hildy, should he decide to forfeit his career, as Burns makes clear: "Jesus, Hildy, you're a newspaperman, not some faggot writing poetry about brassieres and laxatives." As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has argued it is precisely this "'obligatory heterosexuality' [that] is built into male-dominated kinship systems," and intended to dispel any continuities between the homosocial and the homosexual.⁷ Thus in many Wilder films, characters involved in male friendships face the impossibility of a heterosexual relationship and the taboo of a homosexual one. When Wilder's films do conclude with a heterosexual romance, that happy ending often appears improbable, tagged-on, or otherwise compromised (as it does in *Hold Back the Dawn*; *A Foreign Affair*; *Sabrina*; *Love in the Afternoon*; and *The Apartment*). It is in this context that the playful allusion to homosexuality in *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* (as well as in *Some Like It Hot* and possibly *Double Indemnity*) gains its liberating significance.

Male bonding, finally, is of course also central to Wilder professional relationships, most notably his two longterm writing partners Charles Brackett and I.A.L. Diamond (while his closest personal friends were William Holden and Jack Lemmon, the two actors he most frequently cast). Wilder himself used the term "marriage" to allude to the significance of a shared daily routine of the writing partners, a mutual tolerance for each other's quirks, a commitment to a common goal—sometimes punctured by "infidelities," that is, stints with other writing partners—and an acknowledgement that the sum of their labor is more than the mere process of adding together two individual efforts. While Wilder's collaboration with Brackett began with their script of *Bluebeard's Eight Wife* and ended after *Sunset Boulevard*, the one with Diamond started with *Love in the Afternoon* and ended with *Buddy Buddy*, the last feature for both of them. Many critics have felt that Wilder's collaboration with Brackett—a person

in character, upbringing, education, and political beliefs a direct opposite of Wilder—has ultimately produced greater films than those cowritten with Diamond, also a Central European Jewish émigré who shared many of Wilder's tastes and sensibilities.

Anything But Elementary: The Fumbling Detective

Billy Wilder has described *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* as “more *The Odd Couple* than Conan Doyle,” suggesting that it fits squarely into the ancestry of the buddy film outlined above.⁸ Indeed, Colin Blakely imbues his Dr. Watson with qualities worthy of Jack Lemmon, making him at turns oversensitive, nervous, jealous, and neurotic; just as Jerry is shown clenching a flower in his mouth when doing a tango with Osgood, so Watson too wears a flower behind his ear when dancing with a chorus line in which the girls are replaced one after another by male dancers, once Holmes has spread “the truth” about him and Watson.

Yet despite thematic continuities with Wilder's earlier films, *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* is a film in a league of its own, displaying a strong respect for the work of Conan Doyle and a profound familiarity with his characters. Even though the various episodes Wilder and Diamond wrote for the film are original material intended to focus on parts of Holmes's persona not addressed by Doyle, they incorporate many of the character traits, settings, plot elements, and objects that are essential to Doyle's stories and novels, making it in tone one of the most faithful of Wilder's many literary adaptations. A pronounced Sherlock Holmes fan, Wilder was as much intent on capturing the mystique of Holmes as on debunking a myth.

Like so many other Wilder films, *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* revolves around the tension between appearance and being (“Schein” and “Sein”), which can be traced along three distinct levels of deception, or forms of closeting. As the title of the film signals, the story revolves around what narrator Dr. Watson has kept private about the famous hero, namely his possible homosexuality, his problematic relationship with women, his excessive use of drugs (which is given much more space here than in the stories and novels), and the repeated failure of his powers of detection, which stands in distinct contrast to Holmes's near infallibility demonstrated in Doyle's works (where in over sixty adventures he only twice fails to solve a case). As Watson has determined before his death, fifty years will provide the appropriate passage of time to share these secrets, for after all, as he always insisted to Holmes, “the public has a right to know these things.”

Ironically, it is this desire to reach an audience that has created a second level of deception, for Watson's embellishments have painted a larger-than-life image of Holmes to which the detective cannot live up. His words

to Mme. Valladon, cited above, that “the good doctor is constantly putting words into my mouth,” attest to the detective’s unease about Watson’s storytelling, and the fact that Watson has described him, for example, as a violin virtuoso when Holmes perceives himself to be a musician who could barely hold his own “in the Pit Orchestra of a second rate Music Hall” has created the potential for serious public embarrassment. Holmes literally fails to live up to the expectations of Mme. Petrova, who thought him to be taller and of course interested in women. Finally, Holmes’s complaints about having to wear an “improbable costume” in public—the deerstalker cap, Inverness cape, and calabash pipe—in order to meet the expectations Watson’s stories have created points to the power of the media in determining one’s “true” identity, a central concern also in Wilder’s films about the twentieth-century print media and culture industry, of which *Strand Magazine* and the tabloids of the Victorian age are cast here as important precursors.⁹ *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* presents Watson as both the creator of the myth of the famous detective and its debunker, a position not unlike that of the Hollywood director taking on an industry in which he has been a key player for many years.

The discerning of the difference between what is real and what is not, the distinction between ruse and real evidence, is of course the true stuff detective fiction is made of, and lies at the core of the plot and plotting of *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*. Deception abounds, as a Belgian damsel in distress is actually a German spy, with her allies disguised as Trappist monks who end up trapped in a submarine made to look like the Loch Ness monster; Mycroft’s Diogenes Club is a decoy for British intelligence while Holmes and Watson’s relationship apparently entails more than it seems, with the greatest surprise being that Holmes ends up with the short end of the stick in the overall game of make believe—not only is he outwitted by an opponent, but he, too, turns to be out a different kind of man than commonly believed. Like almost all other adventures of Sherlock Holmes, this one also has been recorded by Dr. Watson. Thus in accordance with convention, the film opens with Watson’s voiceover, addressing his heirs from beyond the grave as it were (but in a less gruesome way than Joe Gillis or the dying Walter Neff), as an omniscient tone familiar from Doyle’s fiction describes the setting for the newest adventure to unfold. The voiceover then disappears, only to emerge briefly to comment on Holmes’s cocaine binges and to bridge the Petrova and the Valladon episode. What is fundamentally different in this Holmes adventure, though, is that with the appearance of Mme. Valladon at Baker Street the viewer is aware of something that Holmes and Watson do not yet know—that her arrival has been observed by a third party, and that unbeknownst to Holmes and Watson she is subsequently relating messages to that party.¹⁰ The position of the audience being more cognizant than the detective not only curtails his opportunity to explain in detail the stunning solution to a case, often from the skimpiest of evidence, to a totally unsuspecting and

baffled reader (the kind of scene which invariably concludes a Holmes adventure); more importantly, it also sets up his failure as the audience is in a position to judge every wrong step he takes and every bungled or belated conclusion he draws. Thus when Mycroft reveals to his younger brother that his client is a spy, he only confirms suspicions viewers have had all along.¹¹ With Watson no longer the sole master of the narrative, Holmes's command over the case slips away as well.

Highlighting Holmes's failing powers of reasoning and deduction, both on the level of the plot as well as through a changed narrative strategy, must be seen as the most dramatic reworking of Doyle's famous character in *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*, since this detective has always been the symbol for the accomplishments of reason and rationalism. Holmes's success is built on keen observation and stringent logical deduction; the reward for solving a crime lies solely in the intellectual challenge, as he gladly lets the inferior Scotland Yard detectives claim the limelight for cases he has solved. That he ends up on the right side of the law seems merely accidental for it is the intellectual not the moral challenge that drives him (even though the ability to break the law in order to gather evidence—as for example in the breakin shown in *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*—puts him at an advantage over the police force). As Heide Schlüpmann has observed: "For the detective, rationality is a means in itself."¹²

It is precisely this emphasis on reason that attracted Siegfried Kracauer to write about Doyle and other noted contemporary crime novelists. In his 1925 essay, "The Detective Novel," Kracauer presented the genre as mirror of a society dominated by rationalism, praising it for its ability to capture in the form of a caricature "the condition of a society in which the unattached intellect has achieved its final victory."¹³ Long before Adorno bemoaned a modernity gone awry because of its adoration of instrumental reason, Kracauer diagnosed the same symptom through the help of the detective novel. Holmes's obsession is brought into relief through his pairing with Dr. Watson, since the profession of the medical doctor at first sight resembles that of the detective. The doctor bases his diagnosis on observing and interpreting symptoms, just as the detective formulates his hypotheses through the assembly of clues and circumstantial evidence. Yet while the doctor wants to heal, argues Kracauer, the detective uses sick society as mere cause and material for his deductions, which are an end in themselves. Holmes is ultimately not interested in a moral betterment of society but only in the problem a case poses to his intellectual capabilities; that solving a crime also coincides with helping the police is a mere byproduct and of no concern to Holmes.

Wilder's rejection of the image of Holmes as a coldhearted rationalist stands in distinct contrast to Doyle; it makes Holmes more human, but it also turns him into a tragic figure, a closeted romanticist as it were (a point I will return to below). Yet in order to be credible and not let the film deteriorate into sensationalism or mere parody, Wilder needed to bal-

ance his ambition to recast Holmes with a fidelity to the figure(s) Conan Doyle created.¹⁴ As has been observed by several Wilder critics as well as the numerous scholars and fans that make up the Sherlock Holmes industry, Wilder did indeed know his Doyle and carefully incorporated materials found in other Holmes adventures as well as Doyle's own biography.¹⁵ Thus tobacco experiments are conducted in *The Sign of Four* and "The Boscombe Valley Mystery," while the theft of a submarine is the topic of "The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans," and a hydraulic pump takes center stage in "The Adventure of the Engineer's Thumb." The ridiculing of Scotland Yard detective Lestrade, a favorite pastime of Doyle's Holmes, was reiterated in the episode of the upside down room, where Watson and Holmes persuade Lestrade to stand on his head to better understand the dimension of the crime, while advising the other police officers not to disturb him.¹⁶

Most important of course are the similarities between Mme Valladon/Ilse von Hoffmannsthal and Irene Adler from "A Scandal in Bohemia," as Sinyard and Turner have pointed out.¹⁷ As Watson has it, "to Sherlock Holmes she is always *the* woman," underscoring her singularity both as the only woman who seems to have mattered in Holmes's entire life, as well as the only adversary he could not beat.¹⁸ Yet the significance of this story for the film goes further than Sinyard and Turner describe. Not only are von Hoffmannsthal and Adler both German, but in both cases all that is left to console the defeated detective is a portrait of the woman who outwitted him. Adler's portrait was the only reward Holmes claimed from his client for bringing the case to a fortuitous conclusion (even though he himself had little to do with that), while von Hoffmannsthal's portrait adorns the pocket watch that is taken from the strongbox at the beginning of the film, a memento that Holmes apparently cherished until his end.¹⁹ Moreover, it is in this story that Watson for the first time describes in more detail Holmes's drug abuse, "alternating from week to week between cocaine and ambition, the drowsiness of the drug, and the fierce energy of his own keen nature,"²⁰ which coincides with Watson having moved out of the Baker Street apartment, due to his marriage. And it is in this story that Holmes twice wears a disguise to outwit his opponent, with lack of success equal to that his Mr. Ashdown camouflage has in Scotland, where he is readily recognized as Holmes. The tone of defeat, unrequited love, and loneliness is stronger in this story than in almost any other written by Doyle and presents a strong link to *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*.

Wilder's intention to stay close to that tone can also be seen in the fact that he deliberately did not cast big stars who would have imposed their persona on Watson's and Holmes's characters, opting instead to use actors largely unknown outside the United Kingdom. Both Robert Stephens (as Holmes) and Colin Blakely (as Watson) had been significant stage actors in England, but had had limited screen appearances. Equally unorthodox was Wilder's choice to have Christopher Lee appear as brother Mycroft

(disregarding Doyle's description of Sherlock's brother as portly), for Lee had already played Holmes in the Artur Brauner-produced *Sherlock Holmes und das Halsband des Todes* (Terence Fisher and Frank Winterstein, 1962) and had starred as Sir Henry Baskerville in Terence Fisher's 1959 spiced-up adaptation of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* made by Hammer studios, whose good helping of bare-bosomed women, bloody daggers, and campy horror stands in stark contrast to the autumnal and melancholy quality of Wilder's film.²¹ Thus Lee's Mycroft possesses the mental superiority his Holmes used to have but which is lacking in the Holmes played by Stephens.

If Holmes complains that Watson has burdened him with an image the public now expects him to conform to, this observation is even more fitting for Wilder's task to cast Holmes and Watson. For by 1970 the image of these characters had been much more determined by the screen versions than Doyle's fiction, making Wilder's film, according to a memo by United Artists, the 127th adaptation in the tradition.²² Perhaps no other performer, particularly within the US, did as much as Basil Rathbone to define the look and character of the master sleuth (with Nigel Bruce starring as his sidekick) in his fourteen appearances between 1939 and 1946, and Wilder's recasting of Holmes as the rationalist foiled by his inner romanticism must be seen as much a reworking of Rathbone's interpretation of the role (and that of his many followers) as of the one established by Doyle.

Within the balancing act of working within and against the grain of the Holmes tradition, one more avenue of innovation needs to be mentioned. Even though as a period film *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* seems to be contained in its own fictional space, it is not removed from political events which then mattered, highlighting a topicality that is given more weight than in Doyle's fiction. The reference to the Wilhelmstrasse for which—according to Mycroft—Holmes has inadvertently been working, clearly hints at a German militarism then gaining prominence (inaugurated with Germany's defeat of France some fifteen years earlier), while also foreshadowing German warfare of the twentieth century. (The ambivalence toward Germany—waving between the attraction to a beautiful woman and the threat of its military power—resonates of course also with the exile's conflicted stand toward his homeland.) In this same context belongs also Queen Victoria's lack of interest in submarines, which would prove to have dramatic consequences for England during World War I, when the Royal Navy was illprepared to face an underwater threat from the Germans. Indeed, Doyle himself wrote the story, "Danger!" based on the fictional diary of a submarine commander, just two years before the outbreak of World War I with the explicit intent of alerting Britain to the threat posed by the German fleet commanded by Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, the namesake of the German spy working with Ilse von Hoffmannsthal. Similarly, Holmes's remark to Mme. Petrova that he is "a bleeder" is an

allusion to the then little known fact that Queen Victoria was a carrier of hemophilia (though not affected by it). These allusions to current and future events create the sense that the time and place depicted in the film are about to disappear, offering a glimpse of a society and worldview to vanish forever, surviving only as memory and dusty mementoes collected in a strongbox locked up in a vault.²³

Portrait of the Director as a Melancholic Detective

As noted above, the recasting of Sherlock Holmes as closeted romantic (and possible homosexual) with failing powers of reasoning is carefully balanced with a fidelity to Doyle's characters and the world they inhabit.²⁴ There is, furthermore, a strong recurrence in *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* of themes that pervade the rest of Wilder's oeuvre, allowing us to see this film also as a meditation on the figure of the (aging) film director and artist in a rapidly changing world. As Maurice Zolotow (and numerous critics after him) have observed, *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* may indeed be Wilder's "most personal film."²⁵

Wilder's affinity to both Holmes and Watson must be seen as closely related to his own journalistic upbringing, which included covering the crime beat and writing portraits of contemporaries that would capture the public imagination. The appeal of the adventures of Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson lies in the fact that it combines two figures—the detective and the writer-journalist—that are most central to Wilder's own career and professional self-understanding. Like the writers and journalists described in earlier chapters, the detective is ubiquitous in Wilder's films, from the hordes of self-proclaimed young detectives who surround Emil in his quest to catch a thief, through a private eye disregarding all rights for privacy while spying on Harry Hinkle on behalf of a suspicious insurance company (*The Fortune Cookie*), the doting father detective Claude Chavasse (*Love in the Afternoon*), to claims inspector Keyes in *Double Indemnity*, like Holmes a self-described misogynist. In *Witness for the Prosecution* (based on the work of Agatha Christie, another notable British crime writer), we see a famous lawyer double as detective, only also to be outwitted by a woman. What is unique in *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*, however, is that the figure of the detective and that of the journalist are brought into tension within the same film, allowing Wilder to play off the investigative part of the detective/journalist with the act of recording and publication.

Wilder has often underscored his lifelong fascination with Doyle's adventures, and his efforts to produce a work based on them date as far back as 1957.²⁶ However, when the project finally came to fruition it proved to be one of his biggest commercial and critical failures, dealing his career a blow from which he never quite recovered. One common reaction was an unwillingness to accept a romantic film from a director who in the public

eye was largely considered a cynic, especially after the scandal of *Kiss Me, Stupid*. Wilder himself blamed the cuts imposed by the studio on the film's lack of success. As we know, the film that was premiered by United Artists with a running time of 125 minutes presents a seriously curtailed version of Wilder's envisioned film of over 200 minutes.

In the past, imagining the original version of the film required some serious detective work, but is now facilitated by the DVD edition, which not only contains footage and audio of parts of the eliminated episodes but also an interview with editor Ernest Walter, whom Wilder left in charge to make the imposed cuts when he had to move on to another assignment. Originally, the film was to consist of four individual episodes, loosely connected by a frame narrative: "The Curious Case of the Upside Down Room," "The Singular Affair of the Russian Ballerina," "The Dreadful Business of the Naked Honeymooners," and "The Adventure of the Dumbfounded Detective." There was also an extended prologue featuring the Canadian grandson of Dr. Watson arriving in London to open the safe deposit box, the Oxford flashback described earlier, and a short comic interlude on the train that was to precede Holmes's and Watson's return to Baker Street in August of 1887, which now opens the film proper. While



Figure 7.3. One of the episodes that was cut: "The Curious Case of the Upside Down Room"

the individual episodes are self-contained and significantly different in tone, one common underlying thread is the relationship between men and women. In the comic interlude, a sudden intruder surprises Holmes and Watson aboard a train, only to fall unconscious in their compartment. In a stunning display of his powers of observation and deduction, Holmes identifies the man as an adulterer caught *in flagranti*, a hypothesis he confirms by scaring the man into jumping off the running train. His conduct introduces Holmes as the coldhearted and unemotional rationalist that was to be contradicted in the final episode, "The Adventure of the Dumbfounded Detective," revolving around his encounter with Mme. Valladon. In "The Naked Honeymooners," Watson is allowed to prove *his* talents as detective, an opportunity he thoroughly bungles as he mistakes a couple of sleeping newlyweds for victims of a double homicide. "The Curious Case of the Upside Room" confirms again Holmes's superior mental powers—as well as a lack of imagination on Watson's part as his concocted crime is all too apparent for Holmes—but more importantly the episode plays off the close male relationship described earlier. These allusions to homosexuality then take center stage in the episode with Mme. Petrova, never to be entirely dispelled for the rest of the film.²⁷ They were to resurface in the coda which editor Walter suggested (but Wilder did not accept)—Rogozhin was to appear at 221B Baker Street, presenting the Stradivarius to Holmes (for services that were never rendered) and a bouquet of flowers to Watson, as sign of his own affection for the doctor.²⁸

As Wilder commented, the episodic structure was to resemble the movements of a symphony: "I structured my film in four parts, like a symphony: one for drama, one for comedy, one for farce, and one for romance."²⁹ Of central importance for the film was the score by Miklós Rózsa, which built on a violin concerto written in 1953 for the virtuoso Jascha Heifetz that Wilder liked very much. (Working with Rózsa meant resuming a collaboration after a twenty-five year break, after he had scored *Five Graves to Cairo*, *Double Indemnity*, and *The Lost Weekend*; Rózsa would work with Wilder again one last time on *Fedora*).³⁰ Using a violin concerto was of course an obvious choice for the violin amateur Holmes, and throughout the film diegetic and nondiegetic violin music is used as a structuring device. As Poague has shown, the violin is always associated with sexuality—in the opening credits we listen to the music Holmes wrote for "Ilse von H," while the score is taken out of the box and her portrait is shown (this was in fact Rózsa's concerto, written some fifty years after Holmes's death but sounding very much in character), establishing a connection between violin music and Holmes's attraction to Ilse that will also conclude the film. Then there is of course the fact that Petrova's gift for fathering a child is a Stradivarius, and that Holmes's first love was the daughter of his violin teacher.³¹

While Holmes the violin amateur is of course Doyle's creation, the significance of this artistic streak is much emphasized in Wilder's film. It is

Wilder's Watson, not Doyle's, who explains that Holmes "elevated a science [detection] to an art," thereby establishing a hierarchy that is very different in Doyle's fiction, where Holmes is primarily seen as a scientist and presents Watson early on in their relationship with a document "Sherlock Holmes—his limits" that reads: "1. Knowledge of literature—Nil; Knowledge of Philosophy—Nil; Knowledge of Chemistry—Profound," thereby proudly attesting to his lack of interest in matters that do not further his professional qualifications.³² This artistic and aesthetic streak in Holmes finds its equivalent in Ilse von Hoffmannsthal, who shares her name with the Austrian poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874–1929), while her undercover name Valladon seems to be inspired by another artist, the French post-impressionist painter Suzanne Valadon (1865–1938). If Holmes hides his vulnerability under the mask of rationalism, Valladon, too, is disclosed as being more than just an ambitious master spy. She professes to have taken on the assignment in England because she "couldn't resist the challenge of coming up against the best," but in the end finds herself much closer to Holmes than anticipated (and vice versa). Tragically, it is Holmes's intervention to have her exchanged for another spy rather than imprisoned that will allow her to take on an assignment that will kill her. Through his brother Mycroft, Holmes learns that on this assignment her undercover name was Mrs. Ashdown, revealing that the attraction was mutual, and having Holmes again seek consolation through cocaine.

The attributes of Holmes the artist (as well as the detective) are boredom, loneliness, and isolation. No great challenges seem to exist for him any more, and in the adventure he does get involved in, technocrats like his brother Mycroft have the upper hand (although Mycroft, as Holmes observes, is in the end also undone by a woman, as the Queen dislikes the kind of warfare he is planning). London, the capital of an empire on which the sun never sets, is depicted as a sunless, suffocating place, what with the fog, the dust on Holmes's manuscripts, and the smoke-infested Baker Street flat where he conducts his tobacco ash experiments. Trauner's sets recreate a Victorian age cluttered with the bric-a-brac of an era that has gone on for too long. The shots of the flat show a comfortable but restrictive space, with the camera never allowed inside Holmes's private room, always only peeking in. Washed-out sepia-tinted colors recall the faded photographs which we see emerging from the strongbox at the film's beginning. The trip to Scotland provides a powerful contrast to this suffocating place—lush green landscapes and rugged castles where the tourists Holmes and Valladon ride on a tandem and enjoy a picnic by the lake—but it is only a temporary one. The English government is the true owner of an abandoned Scottish castle, and the Loch Ness monster is a mere concoction, perhaps suggesting the same for Sherlock Holmes, the other world-famous mythical creature of Great Britain.

One gains the sense that the film not only depicts a time now long past but that the coming end of that era pervades the film itself and is registered

with varying degrees by the different characters. Queen Victoria, as noted above, is out of step with the times, Holmes is bored by them, von Hoffmannsthal falls victim to them in the preparations for the impending war, while the great dancer Petrova has to retire from her profession due to her age, husbandless and without a successor (only jolly Watson seems oblivious to the coming changes). As has been observed, Petrova's proposal to Holmes recalls *Sunset Boulevard*: the aging star, through the help of her slave-like assistant, hopes to become immortal by having a child with her attributes, but can only achieve this through the help of a younger man. But what has gone unnoticed is that Holmes, unlike Gillis, is himself subject to the process of aging, having arrived at the height of his fame but finding himself with nowhere to go. Like Norma Desmond and Fedora, Holmes too suffers from the obligation of having to live up to an image created by others. This predicament may have well been Wilder's own, who by 1970, after a series of commercially and critically disappointing features, had to face the question whether the six-time Academy Award winner still had it in him. In the four films that would follow—*Avanti!*; *The Front Page*; *Fedora*; and *Buddy Buddy*—the question of ageing (in connection with suicide) would continue to take center stage.

With a budget of about \$10 million, a shooting schedule of over six months, and a script of over 260 pages, *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* was Wilder's most ambitious project to date, and followed his last film after more than four years, the longest gap between films since he had begun directing. The final film was envisioned as a three-hour roadshow extravaganza with only two shows a day, following the successful example of some other films of the 1960s presented this way, including *Dr. Zhivago*, *My Fair Lady*, *Lawrence of Arabia*, and *The Sound of Music*. Yet a number of sensational flops of lavish Hollywood productions toward the end of the decade cautioned United Artists to take a more conservative approach toward marketing the film, and to demand that the Mirisch Company and Wilder pare down the running time to something suitable for a normal theatrical release. Even though Wilder had the last word over the final cut, he agreed to drastic changes rather than not see his film distributed at all. It premiered at New York's Radio City Music Hall on 29 October 1970 and was met with considerably less public interest than anticipated and very mixed reviews. Originally intended as a blockbuster for the holiday season, it was withdrawn from Radio City Music Hall before Thanksgiving and had an abbreviated national run that recovered only \$1.5 million, a mere fraction of the overall cost—a financial failure that doomed Wilder's last decade as a director.

Contemporaries saw Wilder's failure as symptomatic for an aging director in a rapidly changing world of filmmaking in which he no longer belonged, but in some ways Wilder proved to be *ahead* of his time. In the 1970s and 1980s there followed a series of commercially highly successful book and film adaptations of the Holmes adventures for which Wilder can claim

to have paved the way. The year of the film's release saw a novelization by devout Holmesians Michael and Mollie Hardwick that closely followed the released version of Diamond and Wilder's script and had considerable international success.³³ Even more successful was the 1974 novel *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution* by Nicholas Meyer, a runaway bestseller which revolves around Holmes's cocaine addiction and has the famous detective seek therapy with Dr. Sigmund Freud (made into a film by Herbert Ross in 1976).³⁴ Michael Dibdin's *The Last Sherlock Holmes Story* (1978) and Janyang Norbu's *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes: The Missing Years* (2000) are two ambitious novels that like Wilder's film "uncover" hitherto unknown episodes in the detective's life. Among the many Holmes films that followed, Gene Wilder's comedy *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes's Smarter Brother* (1975, starring Gene Wilder in the title role) and the Spielberg-produced *Young Sherlock Holmes* (1985, directed by Barry Levinson) stand out. Most recently, Julian Barnes's novel *Arthur and George* (2005) reflects on the life of Conan Doyle in a historically documented encounter with a young victim of a miscarriage of justice that has Doyle himself turn into a detective.

The lack of success of *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* certainly meant something far more serious for Wilder than "the occasional failure" which according to Holmes we all experience now and then. *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* is the only commercial failure Wilder was never able to leave behind, the only film about which he regretted having been forced into making changes. Yet in the long run the film has recovered in cultural capital what it failed to secure at the box office at the time of its release. For many of Wilder's critics, the film counts today among his most accomplished achievements, combining an elegiac and romantic tone never seen before. Andrew Sarris has called it a "mellow masterpiece,"³⁵ while Stephen Farber similarly praised its "mellow, autumnal mood, unusual for Wilder."³⁶ Kevin Lally has claimed that the film may visually be "the most handsome film of Wilder's career,"³⁷ and Leland Poague has written that it "has grace and style beyond all power of description."³⁸ Sinyard and Turner, who can still claim to be the most astute critics of this particular film, conclude their insightful analysis by calling it, "the very essence of a mature masterpiece. Breathing a serenity without sloppiness, a melancholy without rancor, a mellowness without sentimentality, its very defiance of modishness makes it one of the most beautiful of modern films."³⁹

Several of Wilder's films are famous for scenes that were shot but not included (most notably *Double Indemnity* and *Sunset Boulevard*), but in these cases the cuts were the director's choice, who felt the film would be stronger in the shorter version. Indeed no other Wilder film has been as seriously mutilated by the studio as *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* (clearly also a sign of his diminishing authority), and there is no film about which Wilder has felt greater disappointment for not having been able to show it the way he had planned. In his conversation with Cameron

Crowe, Wilder, who is usually not one to dwell on commercial failures, was uncharacteristically candid about the film's lack of success, reminiscing that it was "a very, very well-done picture. It was the most elegant picture I've ever shot"—only immediately to fall back into character by adding, "I don't shoot elegant pictures. Mr. Vincente Minnelli, *he* shot elegant pictures."⁴⁰ What a pity indeed, then, that the one film Wilder considered worthy of that praise did not survive in the form the director had planned.

Notes

1. Wilder quoted in Charlotte Chandler, *Nobody's Perfect*, 268.
2. Among Doyle scholars and aficionados, there is some debate how many times Watson was actually married. The stories themselves do not differentiate between the first and subsequent marriages.
3. Wilder has commented that a certain sexual ambiguity also surrounded actor Robert Stephens: "I was never quite sure if he was homosexual." (*Conversations with Wilder*, 301.) In his autobiography, Stephens states with some distress that he has heard of viewers who think "the implied homosexuality ... between Holmes and Watson is meant seriously." Robert Stephens, *Knight Errand: Memoirs of a Vagabond Actor* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995), 99. Overall, Stephens experienced working with Billy Wilder as a very trying time during which he overdosed on alcohol and sleeping pills, understood by many as a suicide attempt.
4. For a sampling of the films inspired by Conan Doyle see Chris Steinbrunner and Norman Michaels, *The Films of Sherlock Holmes* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadell, 1978); Robert W. Pohle and Douglas C. Hart, *Sherlock Holmes on the Screen* (London: Thomas Yoseloff, 1977); and Gordon E. Kelley, *Sherlock Holmes Screen and Sound Guide* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1994).
5. See Brian Gallagher, "'I Love You Too': Sexual Warfare and Homoeroticism in Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity*," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 15.4 (1987): 237–246.
6. *On Sunset Boulevard*, 548.
7. Eve Kosofsky Segdwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 3.
8. *Billy Wilder Interviews* 61.
9. Watson is correct in defending himself by saying, "That's not my doing—blame it on the illustrator" (of *Strand Magazine*), for these trademarks of Holmes are nowhere to be found in the original novels and stories.
10. Already in *Five Graves to Cairo* a parasol is used by a woman to relate secret messages. Significantly, Valladon's parasol proves far more effective than Holmes's walking stick which hides a saw and a chisel.
11. A similar diversion from Doyle's narrative strategy is also evident in the opening credits. When the relics of Watson and Holmes are taken out of the safe deposit box, we are shown Holmes's pocket watch, which is adorned with a photograph of Ilse von Hoffmannsthal, a clear sign of his affection only to be developed much later in the film, as well as a hint at her true identity. The use of foreshadowing or any anticipatory remarks are completely absent from Watson's accounts.
12. Heide Schlüppmann, *Ein Detektiv des Kinos: Studien zu Siegfried Kracauers Filmtheorie* (Basel: Stroemfeld, 1998), 22.
13. Siegfried Kracauer, "Der Detektiv-Roman," *Schriften 1* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1971), 105. The essay was published posthumously in 1971.

14. As Wilder commented: "I've loved the stories from boyhood, and the last thing I would want to do is parody them in any way." (Quoted in *The Films of Sherlock Holmes*, 216.)
15. See the respective chapters in Poague and Sinyard and Turner; see also Charles Higham, *The Adventures of Conan Doyle: The Life of the Creator of Sherlock Holmes* (New York: Norton, 1976), as well as the books on the filmic adaptations of Doyle's fiction cited earlier.
16. As Holmes fans have been quick to point out, Diamond and Wilder's script is not without a few factual mistakes; thus *Strand Magazine* did not begin publication until 1891, four years after the events taking place described in the film, while *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, of which Mme. Petrova is a fan, was not published until 1902, and only much later in Russian translation. Such mistakes, however, are in keeping with Watson's own occasional memory lapses.
17. *Journey Down Sunset Boulevard*, 264.
18. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Novels and Stories* (London: Bantam, 1986), volume 1, 209.
19. The detectives among viewers will certainly establish a connection between name, portrait, and music early on in the film: the sheet music is a concerto dedicated to "Ilse von H" and composed by Sherlock Holmes; it is taken out of the strong box just before the pocket watch which contains a photograph of a woman we now understand to be the mysterious Ilse von H; furthermore, the nondiegetic music that underscores the scene is in fact the sheet music we see, (which in reality was composed by Miklós Rózsa, whose creditline is placed next to von H's portrait), and which from that point on Holmes will play when thinking of Ilse.
20. *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Novels and Stories*, volume 1, 209.
21. For a reading of the Brauner films, and particularly Lee as Holmes, see Tim Bergfelder, *International Adventures: German Popular Cinema and European Co-Productions in the 1960s* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2005).
22. A copy of the memo from United Artists Corporation/Publicity Department (dated 2-12-1970) is found at the BFI archive in London.
23. The only other period film that resembles the remoteness of *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* is *The Emperor Waltz*. Set in Austria in 1901, it is however a film that very much looks forward to the twentieth century, what Henry Luce would later dub the American century, without undertones of nostalgia. As the Emperor tells the American Virgil Smith (played by an energetic, highstrung Bing Crosby): "You Americans are simpler, you are stronger. Ultimately the world will be yours," to which Virgil, without losing a beat, replies: "You bet it will!"
24. As a reviewer in the *London Times* wrote, Wilder's adaptation "should offend no one, not even the most dedicated members of the Sherlock Holmes Society" (11 December 1970). Ironically, such a member was actually included in the original opening sequence at the bank, where a managing director identifies himself as a serious Holmes fan and scholar and laments the current James Bond craze ("that secret service chap—the one with the hairy chest—it's all trash") as a sign of how the art of detective fiction has declined.
25. Zolotow, *Billy Wilder in Hollywood*, 322.
26. References to Doyle's stories are found in several of Wilder's films. In *Ace in the Hole*, journalist Chuck Tatum speaks about reporting on the Loch Ness monster, while Lord X in *Irma la Douce* claims to possess a hound of the Baskervilles as a pet. The original plans for adapting Doyle first included a musical, then a film musical, and finally became a film. Apart from Diamond, a series of cowriters were temporarily involved in the project.
27. According to Robert W. Pohle and Douglas C. Hart, the original version also gave more room to Petrova and Rogozhin, "the latter evidently having been troubled with some sort of peculiarly delicate personal problems of his own." (*Sherlock Holmes on the Screen*, 222.) I could not find any evidence for this claim elsewhere.
28. Apparently yet another coda was planned in which Lestrade comes to visit Holmes, asking for help with solving the murder of several prostitutes in Whitechapel by a killer

- the newspapers call Jack the Ripper, but Holmes is too heartbroken after Ilse von Hoffmannsthal's death to accept the assignment.
29. Wilder quoted in Bernard Cohen, "Wilder, Billy (Tournage)," *Positif* 109 (1969): 49–50; here 49.
 30. Rózsa makes a brief cameo in the film as conductor of the Swan Lake ballet, a rare honor also accorded to Alexander Trauner, who played an artist in *Irma La Douce*.
 31. *The Hollywood Professionals: Wilder and McCarey*, 138.
 32. *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Novels and Stories*, volume 1, 12. It is worth noting in this context that Robert Stephens had played another artist, the troubled art teacher Teddy Lloyd, in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (Ronald Neame, 1969), which Wilder had seen.
 33. Michael and Mollie Hardwick, *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* (New York Bantam, 1970).
 34. Meyer himself lauded Wilder's film for "the stunning production design by the incomparable Alexander Trauner," but did not elaborate on it as a possible influence on his own novel. See Nicholas Meyer, "Sherlock Holmes on Film: A Personal View," in Charles Putney et al, ed., *Sherlock Holmes: From Victorian Sleuth to Modern Hero* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 1996) 2–10; here 3.
 35. Andrew Sarris, "Billy Wilder and the Holocaust," *Village Voice* 4 May 1984.
 36. Stephen Farber, "The Films of Billy Wilder," *Film Comment* 7.4 (1977): 8–22; here 9.
 37. *Wilder Times*, 372.
 38. *The Hollywood Professionals: Wilder and McCarey*, 125.
 39. *Journey Down Sunset Boulevard*, 304. Along the same lines, John Powers has prophetically described the film as "one of the most sublime comedies ever filmed. Beneath its surface, however, this autumnal tale is suffused with an overpowering sense of sadness and loss, a painful awareness of passing time and mortality. Exquisitely produced and photographed, it's a film whose reputation will grow and grow." Quoted in *Billy Wilder: The Fourteenth Annual American Film Institute Life Achievement Award* (March 6, 1986), 67.
 40. *Conversations with Wilder*, 98.