“The Doctors of Hoyland”: Gender and Modernity in Conan Doyle’s Medical Stories

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Arthur Conan Doyle, a medical doctor by education and early profession, famously based his most enduring literary character Sherlock Holmes upon the Edinburgh surgeon Joseph Bell. His medical writings, both literary and non-fiction pieces, present us with an invaluable insight into late nineteenth-century medicine and the medical debates of the time. Many of these texts can be found in the short story collection *Round the Red Lamp: Being Facts and Fancies of Medical Life* which was published in 1894, during a period of intense change within the medical profession. As Conan Doyle writes in 1910: ‘this generation has, as it seems to me,
brought about a greater change in medical science than any century has done before’ (105). This ‘greater change’ took place not only in terms of new medical technologies and scientific discoveries; late nineteenth-century medical modernity also involved a reworking of notions of gender, epitomised in the debates regarding female doctors. Conan Doyle’s medical short story ‘The Doctors of Hoyland’ from *Round the Red Lamp* thematises the novelty of the female doctor and the controversies provoked by medical women towards the end of the nineteenth century, forming a literary contribution to these debates. As this story demonstrates, the notion of professionalism as well as late-Victorian modern science and technologies prove crucial to the reworking of gender roles in the medical profession, as a way of gaining authority for the female doctor.

The history of female doctors in Britain is a fairly recent one, and it is bound up with the history of women gaining access to higher education, as well as the wider fight for women’s rights in the nineteenth century. While Elizabeth Garrett Anderson is famous in medical history as the first woman to qualify as a medical doctor in the country (after training privately), it was Sophia Jex-Blake who worked publicly for female medical students’ right to university training and graduation, inciting and playing a major role in the debates regarding female doctors in the late nineteenth century (Brock 321). William Knox names Jex-Blake ‘arguably the most important figure in the women’s movement in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century’ (70), while her biographer Margaret Todd claims that Jex-Blake indeed ‘was the movement … she stood … for women’ (vii). According to Susan Kingsley Kent, female doctors played a crucial role even in the fight for suffrage, becoming ‘a source of scientific legitimacy as they sought a redefinition of sexual identity for women that would justify their political inclusion’ (119). Jex-Blake’s campaigning and the ‘Edinburgh Seven’, the first group of female medical students who in 1869 gained entry to the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Edinburgh, sparked great controversies surrounding women’s right to higher education and surrounding their professional authority. While female doctors and medical students had the support from a few medical men and voices in the press, they had to endure much prejudice and harassment (Knox 80-81).¹ In her book *Medical Women: A Thesis and a History* (1886) Jex-Blake describes both the ‘very wide attention and sympathy’ that their cause attracted, and some of the abuse suffered by female medical students: damage of their property, anonymous letters, and several other variations of harassment (110-111). The debate regarding female doctors took place in both the medical and the popular press, where it became part of the
period’s larger conflict over the Woman Question and later also over the (proto)feminist figure of the New Woman (Farkas 139). Although universities later on finally opened their doors to women, the prejudices against and debates around female doctors persisted.

With this background, Conan Doyle’s short story on female doctors gains a specific significance; it becomes part of that both medical and public debate, demonstrating the equal – and sometimes superior – aptitude of women entering the medical profession. First published in the *Idler* in April 1894, ‘The Doctors of Hoyland’ became part of the *Round the Red Lamp* collection when it was brought out in October the same year, ‘at the moment when old-style medicine was dying and the modern medical profession was emerging’ (Darby xx). Conan Doyle himself had attended the University of Edinburgh from 1876 to 1881 as a medical student, starting just three years after the Edinburgh Seven had left. The number of women doctors in Britain had been steadily increasing in the late nineteenth century: there were 8 in 1871, 25 in 1881, 101 in 1891, and 212 in 1901 (Smith 382). The short story depicts the novelty of female doctors at the time, some of the prejudices that they had to face – and also how some of these prejudices were overcome.

Set in the village of Hoyland, in the north of Hampshire, the story introduces the well-established and unrivalled country practitioner Dr James Ripley, who has ‘a clear run of six miles in every direction’ (295). Ripley prides himself above all on his professionalism and up-to-date medical knowledge, spending his leisure time reading professional journals: ‘It was his ambition to keep his knowledge as fresh and bright as at the moment when he had stepped out of the examination hall. He prided himself on being able at a moment’s notice to rattle off the seven ramifications of some obscure artery, or to give the exact percentage of any physiological compound’ (296). Considering his previously unrivalled situation, Ripley is curious to learn that a ‘Verrinder Smith, M.D.’ has opened practice in Hoyland. By consulting the current medical directory, Ripley learns that his new rival is ‘the holder of superb degrees, that he had studied with distinction at Edinburgh, Paris, Berlin and Vienna’, and furthermore that ‘he’ has been awarded a gold medal and the Lee Hopkins scholarship ‘for original research, in recognition of an exhaustive inquiry into the functions of the anterior spinal nerve roots’ (298). Ripley is bewildered by the record of ‘this brilliant neighbour’ and wonders ‘[w]hat on earth could so brilliant a man mean by putting up his plate in a little Hampshire hamlet’ (298-299). Having longed for a kindred mind, Ripley rejoices in making this new
acquaintance and sets out to visit ‘him’.

So unthinkable is it to Ripley that the other doctor of Hoyland might be a woman, that he mistakes Verrinder Smith for the wife of his new rival. When asking the ‘little woman’ facing him if her husband has gone out, he receives the reply that she is not married, and that “‘I am Doctor Verrinder Smith’” (300), to which statement Ripley ‘was so surprised that he dropped his hat and forgot to pick it up again’ (300): “‘What!’ he grasped [sic], ‘the Lee Hopkins prizeman! You!’” (300). Ripley, having never seen a woman doctor before, feels ‘his whole conservative soul rose up in revolt at the idea … as if a blasphemy had been committed’ (301). Very much affronted, he tells Verrinder Smith that he does not consider medicine ‘a suitable profession for women’ and that he has ‘a personal objection to masculine ladies’ (301), and shortly after makes for the door.

Having thus learnt that the other doctor of Hoyland is a woman, Ripley cannot stop thinking of this ‘monstrous intrusion’ of a female doctor: ‘A woman doctor had been an abstract thing before, repugnant but distant. Now she was there in actual practice, with a brass plate up just like his own, competing for the same patients. Not that he feared competition, but he objected to this lowering of his ideal of womanhood. … It revolted him the more to recall the details of her education’ (304). As Kristine Swenson notes, critics of the woman doctor argued that her medical knowledge would ‘unsex’ her or make her a ‘neuter’, ‘biologically incapable of the conventional womanly duties of marriage and motherhood’ (7). Medical study would, it was argued, harm women’s health – particularly their reproductive health (Swenson 87). The label of being a ‘mannish’, ‘masculine’ or ‘unsexed’ woman was a common invective for any woman who threatened the established gender norms at the time; the popular press satirised women who were in any way either physically or mentally active as becoming ‘unwomanly’ (Pykett 141). Women were warned against thus becoming ‘unsexed’ not only through studying medicine, but indeed through studying at all, or for example doing physical exercise. Ripley in Conan Doyle’s story objects to what he calls ‘masculine ladies’, and soon starts referring to his rival as ‘[t]he unsexed woman’ whenever she is mentioned (305).

Facing criticism from various directions, female doctors had to negotiate this odd position as similarly sexed (a woman doctor) and ‘unsexed’ (a ‘masculine’ lady). One of the major ways for early female doctors to gain respect and defend their professional status, and perhaps also to fight accusations of ‘unwomanliness’, was
through the notion of professionalism; by proving one’s up-to-date scientific knowledge and one’s professional skill (Brook 323-324). Modern medicine, as Michel Foucault has argued, emerged with the birth of clinical medicine and hospital-based learning for doctors, implicating new medical approaches based on physical examination, pathological anatomy and statistics. Medicine came to be organised by rules of empiricist and positivist science, and producing and legitimating medical authority and professionalism became dependent upon an idea of scientificity (Foucault xi-xii; Porter 144-145; Dingwall, Rafferty, and Webster 21-22). As Claire Brock argues, in a time where physicians were still struggling to distance themselves from quacks and their pseudo-medicine, professionalism was the most important quality in a doctor. Professionalism thus, Brock states, became the main way also for female doctors in the late nineteenth century to earn respect, a reputation, and patients (324-326). At the time of publication of Conan Doyle’s medical stories, female doctors had only recently been admitted to train in hospitals. As the story shows, the engagement with modern medical science and technologies becomes crucial to the recognition of the female doctor as bearing legitimate authority and skill; as being professional.

We see this focus on scientificity and professionalism in ‘The Doctors of Hoyland’, as Verrinder Smith is depicted as having an extensive knowledge of modern medicine: not only does she hold degrees and practical training from various distinguished institutions in Europe, she has been awarded several medals and scholarships for her research, and Ripley is astounded by the ‘book-case full of ponderous volumes in French and German’ that she keeps in her practice (300). Verrinder Smith further proves her professional superiority and authority on modern medicine when criticising Ripley’s latest paper in the medical journal the Lancet, pointing out his lack of up-to-date references. She shows him a pamphlet of 1891 while he has been using one from 1890: ‘There was no denying that it completely knocked the bottom out of his own article. … She had showed herself to be his superior on his own pet subject’ (302-303). When Ripley’s own number of patients rapidly decreases, instead flocking to his rival’s consulting room, his distaste for this woman doctor deepens into detestation. And when Verrinder Smith succeeds Ripley’s medical authority by taking on cases that he has previously pronounced impracticable, at one point asking him to act as her chloroformist for the operation, ‘it was gall and wormwood to his sensitive nature’ (306). However, in spite of his vexation, Ripley cannot help admiring the skill of his rival: ‘She handled the little wax-like foot so gently, and held the tiny tenotomy knife as an artist holds his pencil. One straight insertion, one snick of a
tendon, and it was all over without a stain upon the white towel which lay beneath. He had never seen anything more masterly, and he had the honesty to say so, though her skill increased his dislike of her’ (306). While Swenson sees Conan Doyle’s story as a satire of the medical-woman genre and character (116), this passage clearly shows an earnest depiction of Ripley being persuaded by his new rival, simply by her ‘masterly’ professional skill. Ripley now detests the other doctor of Hoyland also out of self-preservation, desperate to keep his patients.

Verrinder Smith’s professionalism is evident in the modern medical devices and technologies that she uses. The scientificity of modern medicine, based on physical examination, also took shape in the form of new diagnostic devices; new technologies and tools that helped make medicine scientific in that they made possible the production of knowledge by relying on seeing, visibility, and empiricism. Such ‘sense-extending implements’ made it possible to measure, monitor, analyse and record body functions in a positivist scientific manner (Sandelowski 92), which was crucial for the doctor of the late nineteenth century to maintain one’s professionalism. Engaging with new medical technologies of the time thus becomes a way to gain respect for female doctors in the story. Already before he meets her, Ripley admires the modern medical devices that his rival keeps in her waiting room, proving that the new doctor in Hoyland must be a high-standing one: ‘Elaborate instruments, seen more often in hospitals than in the houses of private practitioners, were scattered about. A sphygmograph stood upon the table and a gasometer-like engine, which was new to Doctor Ripley, in the corner’ (300). Not only Ripley but also Verrinder Smith’s new patients value the new doctor’s instruments, being ‘so impressed by the firmness of her manner and by the singular, newfashioned instruments with which she tapped, and peered, and sounded’, that it forms the subject of village conversation in Hoyland (304). A while after the operation at which he assisted, Ripley breaks his leg in a road accident, and Verrinder Smith becomes the one to patch him up: ‘a woman, with an open case of polished instruments gleaming in the yellow light, was deftly slitting up his trouser with a crooked pair of scissors’ (308). Having noticed the shiny instruments that the other doctor carries in her bag, and impressed by her treatment, Ripley stays under her care. In a period of much advancement in medical science and technology, and as a female doctor, going against what many contemporaries thought was appropriate for her sex, Verrinder Smith employs these modern medical technologies of the time to prove her professionalism – her worth as a doctor.
Despite the seemingly positive portrayal of the female doctor in Conan Doyle’s story, some critics have read ‘Doctors of Hoyland’ as a ‘traditionalist’ (Swenson 123) text. While Swenson sees the story as a satire of the medical-woman literary genre and indeed of the character of the female doctor therein, bearing little relation to social reality and by its comedic elements rendering ‘the “real” politics of the movement completely beside the point’ (116-117), Lilian R. Furst similarly questions the progressive politics of this ‘jovial’ (268) or ‘wrily comic’ (271) story. Furst wonders if the reactions of Ripley are ‘too extreme’, or if Verrinder Smith is ‘too perfect, too much an idealized, exaggerated figure’, thus undermining the story’s interest ‘as a reflection of social reality’ (272). However, there seems little evidence in the story to support this reading as a satire on the female doctor. The character of Verrinder Smith is neither hyperfeminised nor masculinised, ‘unsexed’, as was often the case in the accounts of the popular press; instead, she carries out her work as a doctor while also displaying ‘her sweet, womanly nature’ (312), her waiting room holding not only modern medical technologies but equally ‘two or three parasols and a lady’s sun bonnet’ (299). As the narrator states, Verrinder Smith ‘was a charming companion, as well as the most assiduous doctor’ (312). Ripley comes to acknowledge the worth and cause of female doctors because of Verrinder Smith’s professionalism; in this way, Conan Doyle’s story satirises not the female doctor but – by demonstrating the folly of Ripley’s previous convictions – those who criticise her. By narrating the story through Ripley’s viewpoint, Conan Doyle furthermore, as Furst points out, makes the readers ‘share his conversion’ (271) to the cause, forcing the reader, too, to acknowledge the female doctor’s suitability for the profession through detailed descriptions of her scientific knowledge and ‘masterly’ technical skill.

Ripley finally comes to terms with the sex of his rival. Once the tables have been turned between them after his accident – he becoming her patient – he changes his mind on the so-called ‘woman question’. Ripley apologises to his rival for his previous behavior, acknowledging to ‘have been quite in the wrong … [o]ver this woman question’ (312). When she ask him whether he no longer thinks of female doctors as ‘necessarily unsexed’, he begs her not to recall his ‘idiotic expression’ (312). Indeed, Ripley even asks his rival to marry him, but is declined. As Tabitha Sparks has argued, much of the opposition to female doctors came from the perceived incompatibility of medicine and marriage: one could not have a career while also being a wife and a mother (134-136). Verrinder Smith intends to devote her life to science, and does not see medicine and marriage as compatible, disclosing that she is about to leave for a position in Paris – there will yet again be
only one doctor of Hoyland.

As the story closes, Ripley has gone from a strong adversary to women doctors to a proponent of them, even defending the cause to a fellow male doctor. Through Verrinder Smith’s professionalism, her engagement with modern medical science and technologies, the character gains authority and is able to rework established notions of gender. This medical short story thus directly partakes in the debates around female doctors at the end of the nineteenth century, countering some of the prejudices against these pioneers. As seen in ‘The Doctors of Hoyland’, the medical modernity or ‘greater change’ of which Conan Doyle wrote in 1910 consisted not only of new medical science and technology, but also of a reworking of gender roles.

WORKS CITED


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For the Edinburgh Seven, the sustained harassment they suffered came to a full point in November 1870 during what came to be called the Surgeons’ Hall Riots, when on eighteenth November about two hundred medical students physically hindered the women from entering the building for an anatomy examination, instead hurling abuse at them and passing bottles of whisky around (Knox 81). Even though the behaviour of the male students on this occasion was condemned and in 1874 Jex-Blake together with Garrett...
Anderson and others co-founded the London School of Medicine for Women, the first medical school in Britain to train women (Manton 241–243).

2 See chapter 3 in Swenson for a more extensive account of these debates, and for a discussion of the specific recurrence of the New Woman doctor towards the end of the century. For an overview of the scholarship on Victorian women and medicine generally, see Kristine Swenson’s article in *Literature Compass* 10.5 (2013): 461-472.

3 The double-barrelled last name – perhaps a nod to the double-barrelled last names of the two most famous female doctors of the day, Garrett Anderson and Jex-Blake – of the new doctor of course does not reveal her gender identity to Ripley.

4 See Terrie M. Romano’s *Making Medicine Scientific* (2002) for a British perspective on the transformation of medicine into a science.

5 Examples of such new technologies are the stethoscope (1816), the ophthalmoscope and the laryngoscope (mid-Victorian), the hypodermic syringe (1853), the thermometer and fever charts (1860s), the sphygmomanometer (1880s), and the X-ray (1895) (Porter 41-42, 75).

6 Verrinder Smith’s philosophy is in disagreement with that of Garrett Anderson, who married but continued practising medicine. Garrett had written, in a letter to her sister in 1870 when getting engaged: ‘I am sure that the women question will never be solved in any complete way so long as marriage is thought to be incompatible with freedom and with an independent career and I do think that there is a very good chance that we may be able to do something to discourage the notion’ (qtd in Brock 333). The supposed incompatibility of a marital life and a medical career is discussed in various works of the late nineteenth century: in Margaret Todd’s *Mona Maclean, Medical Student* (1894), for example, the main character
does marry while also continuing her medical practice. Jex-Blake, who was seen as a more controversial figure than Garrett Anderson, did not marry.