

# BRAINY OR BUSTY? BOTH. SEXUALITY AND INTELLIGENCE IN BBC'S *SHERLOCK*

EMILY MAN

“And that was how a great scandal threatened to affect the kingdom of Bohemia, and how the best plans of Mr. Sherlock Holmes were beaten by a woman’s wit. . . . And when he speaks of Irene Adler, or when he refers to her photograph, it is always under the honourable title of *the woman*.”

—Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (40-41)

Irene Adler is *the woman*. She is the only woman—if not the only person—to ever outwit *the* Sherlock Holmes. The hit BBC TV series *Sherlock* reinvents Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s classic detective stories for a modern-day London. Over ten million eager viewers tuned in for the Emmy-nominated series two opener, featuring the infamous Irene Adler. For this episode, writer Steven Moffat was faced with a challenge: he needed a female character whose strength and intelligence would be just as fresh to a modern viewer as the original Irene Adler was to 1891 readers. His solution was a bold, brilliant, and *sexualized* Irene. A high-end professional dominatrix, Moffat’s Irene plays to her clients’ egos to amass an impressive collection of blackmail materials. When she acquires lewd photographs of a British royal family member, Sherlock is commissioned to retrieve them. Disguised as an assaulted vicar, he shows up at her doorstep hoping to trick her into revealing the location of the photographs. Unlike in the original story, Irene is not fooled for even an instant. Demonstrating that she knows exactly who he is and what he has come for, she confronts him completely nude (Fig. 1).

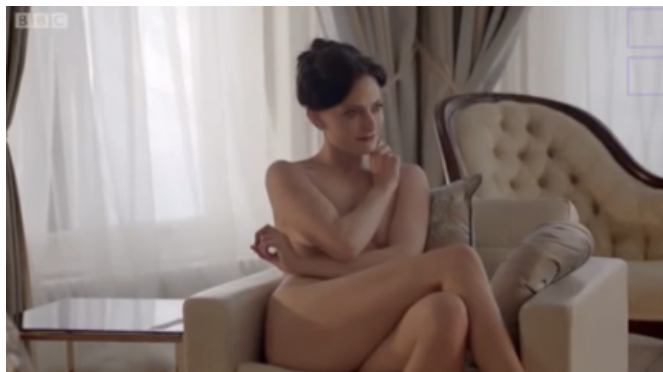


Fig. 1

The feminist community was outraged by this portrayal. As they saw it, Irene Adler had been relegated to a sexual object. The subtitle to a review written by *The Guardian* writer Jane Clare Jones, a doctoral student in philosophy focusing in “feminist ethics,”

summarizes her argument: “In Moffat’s hands the power of Irene Adler, Sherlock Holmes’s female adversary, was sexual, not intellectual. A regressive step” (Jones). Jones argues that Irene’s nudity is “regressive” because her power is not “true” intellectual power; instead, it is tainted because it is *sexual*. To these feminists, her nudity constituted a tacit endorsement of the view that women could never overpower men without using their sexuality. However, there is no doubt that through her actions, sexual as they may be, Irene dominates the conversation and reduces Sherlock to an uncharacteristically stunned silence. Is her success to be disregarded simply because it is achieved by amplifying her sexuality? Is Irene Adler barred from being a model of modern female empowerment because she utilizes her sex appeal?

In discussions of the effect of sexuality on identity, one debated issue has been the relationship between sexuality and agency. On one hand, in his groundbreaking book *Ways of Seeing*, art critic John Berger argues, much like the contemporary feminists, that posing nude is an act of submission to the viewer. Through this submission, the nude woman becomes stripped of identity and agency, simply becoming a sexual object for the male spectator. Thus, he argues, the nude subject’s bareness is “not . . . an expression of her own feelings; it is a sign of her submission to the owner’s feelings or demands” (52). The surveyed woman becomes an empty, homogeneous vessel, a vulnerable sex object, whose sole purpose is to arouse and receive the desires and fantasies of the male viewer.

On the other hand, women’s studies professor Susan Bordo contends in her book *The Male Body* that the surveyed party has agency, power, and even influence over his/her spectator. Bordo discusses her dislike of the term “sex object” because it suggests “a body that is inert, depersonalized, flat, a mere thing” (186). Instead, she argues that these so-called “sex objects” have agency. They “*speak* to us, [and] seduce us” by forcing the viewers to focus on their sexuality. They don’t submit themselves to the viewers; instead, they “exert considerable power over us—over our psyches, our desires, our self-image” (182). Their nudity thus demonstrates their *choosing* to be sexualized in order to force the viewer to confront personal reactions and what those reactions mean. Irene, by coyly lounging in her chair and gazing silently at Sherlock, manages to offer up her “femininity as the surveyed” (Berger 55) without relinquishing control over the viewers’ interpretations. She is objectified but not vulnerable. So where exactly is the balance of power? Is Irene’s nudity a surrendering of herself in that she becomes defined by her sexuality, or is it the source of a power over the most fragile recesses of her viewer’s psyche?

Irene’s character unifies Berger’s and Bordo’s analyses to suggest that modern women can be both traditionally sexual and radically powerful by achieving power through deliberate self-objectification. Though some may view this as a suggestion that women are limited to sexuality for empowerment, Irene’s manipulation of her sexuality demonstrates her brilliance. She manipulates the social stereotype of vulnerable nudity to reveal that she can be bold, brainy, *and* sexy. She embodies a

fusion of the tired tropes of powerful women—nerdy brains, cold-hearted brawn, and sultry temptation—into an original, powerful character truly worthy of besting the great Sherlock Holmes. In no way does she blindly rely on sexuality to ensnare her prey. This version of Irene Adler presents a woman who fully understands the objectifying connotations of nudity and therefore can anticipate men’s reactions. She *chooses* to present herself as vulnerable and compliant to confuse her male adversaries. She uses the traditional surveyor-surveyed relationship to distract from her interrogative nature. Though she already controls the location, information, and blackmail materials, her nudity manipulates the male psyche to give her a winning advantage in the verbal battle of wits.

Moreover, Irene’s nudity acts as a protective shield of anonymity that also grants her insight into her adversaries’ minds. Berger makes a distinction between nakedness and nudity: “To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself” (54). Nudity, according to Berger, “is placed on display,” which effectively “is to have the surface of one’s own skin, the hairs of one’s own body, turned into a disguise” (54). While nakedness is a complete openness of oneself, nudity becomes a method of hiding oneself behind flesh. Irene’s bareness is not expressive but concealing. Her nudity becomes a disguise that hides her true vulnerabilities from Sherlock’s famous deductive powers. Sherlock’s confusion at the lack of readable information from Irene’s appearance is demonstrated by the juxtaposition of John and Irene. In *Sherlock*, the detective’s deductions are visually denoted by overlaid text. John’s appearance and clothing tell Sherlock that John has a “date tonight” and “hasn’t phoned sister” (Figs. 2-3). In contrast, when Sherlock studies Irene, all he gets is “???????” (Fig. 4). Her nudity, which in a previous scene she aptly dubs her “battle armor,” shields her from his dissecting gaze. When his deductive abilities fail, Sherlock doesn’t know how to proceed. Thus, her loss of identity through nudity as Berger defines it is not tragic but deliberate. Without clothing to give him clues, Sherlock must rely on her subsequent actions—something she has complete control over—for information. She uses her nudity to shed her identity, forcing her spectators to try to read and interpret her. This reading is subject to the personal desires, preferences, and personalities of her viewers. By objectifying herself, she becomes a mirror that hides her true self by reflecting the selves of her audience. Irene confronts these men with a blank, homogenous display that forces them to bare their identities—forces them into a nakedness of personality that grants her access into their psyches. This demonstrates that she has taken into consideration Sherlock’s talent for deduction and has prepared for their encounter. Given his ability, nudity is her best option. Her self-objectification allows her to outwit Sherlock and achieve control over the situation.



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

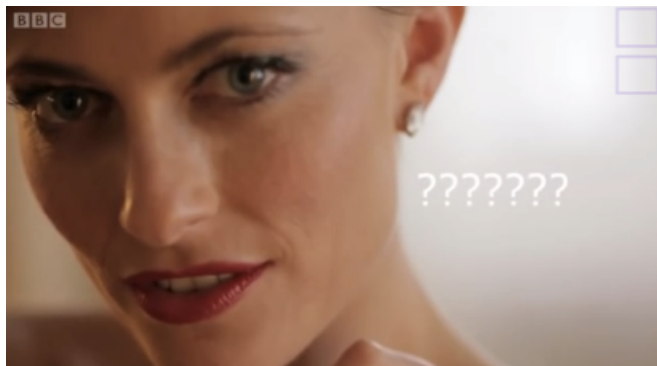


Fig. 4

Furthermore, her actions also demonstrate her understanding of the socially constructed ideals of masculinity. Berger discusses how in the nineteenth century, nude paintings were strategically placed so that men of state could reaffirm their manhood if they needed consolation. Seeing a nude woman “reminded [the spectator] that he was a man,” even if he had just been outwitted by other men (Berger 57). This suggests that the power of the surveyor-surveyed relationship is exclusive to men. Seeing vulnerable, objectified women reminds them that no matter what happens in business or politics, their gender still affords them agency. And yet, sociologist Michael Kimmel demonstrates in his essay “Masculinity as Homophobia” that the qualifying qualities

for masculinity are numerous and fickle. First, masculinity depends on the ability of men to relegate women to sex objects. In this system, women are “a kind of currency” which men use to prove their masculinity to each other (24). To prevent any possibility of being perceived as gay, Kimmel explains, men must “[a]lways be prepared to demonstrate sexual interest in women that [they] meet” (26). Passivity becomes the antithesis of masculinity. The fear of being characterized as such “keeps men exaggerating all the traditional rules of masculinity, including sexual predation with women” (26). Too strong a response, however, will characterize the men in question as “hypermasculine, as sexually aggressive, violent rapacious beasts, against whom ‘civilized’ men must take a decisive stand” (27-8). Barbaric and sexually overzealous men, like the under-responsive (to women, at least) homosexuals, are disqualified from the exclusive club that is true masculinity. Thus, this arbitrarily determined system means that men must constantly consider how others will interpret their actions.

Irene plays off the social system of masculinity to empower herself. Since nudity is commonly interpreted as sexual availability, Irene deliberately invokes the sexual hyper-awareness that the social rules of masculinity dictate. Thus, she uses her nudity to create a conflict between two social expectations: 1) the basic social decorum of being a guest and meeting someone for the first time, and 2) the assumption that a true man must assert his masculinity through sexual responsiveness. How manly can a guy be if he can't assert his sexuality to a woman who is allowing, even *inviting*, objectification? Yet to force the intimacy of sex on someone you just met would be barbaric, even animalistic. Both possible responses lead to the same result: emasculation. Both characterizations—uncivilized brute or potential homosexual—are exactly what masculinity is defined not to be. There is no way that a man operating under the socially constructed definition of masculinity can avoid emasculation when he meets Irene. There is no way that he can demonstrate awareness of her sexuality without seeming overeager. She exploits the internal struggle over how to respond to establish her control. And she succeeds. The hesitation of both John and Sherlock gives her a window to initiate conversation and ask all the questions, thus determining the hierarchy of power within their encounter (Fig. 5). She uses her perceived objectification to disempower her male counterparts and, in turn, gain that power for herself. She not only demonstrates a deep understanding of social conventions, but is able to pinpoint a conflict within those conventions and exploit it to her advantage. Her nudity is a carefully calculated initial sacrifice of perceived agency that allows her to dominate the mental face-off that follows.



Fig. 5

Moffat's Irene Adler demonstrates that sexuality is not inherently disempowering; indeed, her ability to use sexuality to gain power is what makes her truly *modern*, and what demonstrates her acute intellect. Irene deliberately orchestrates her own objectification to protect her own identity and to exploit a weakness in the male psyche. In no way does her wielding of her own sex appeal bar her from empowerment. In fact, her character demonstrates how modern women can use society's existing gender structures to their advantage. Jane Clare Jones and the feminist community were wrong to suggest that this depiction of Irene Adler is "a regression." It is, instead, a progression to the greatest possible degree: that even sexual objectification can no longer put women at an automatic disadvantage. "Brainy is the new sexy," Irene suggests. The combination of intelligence and sexuality, and therein the ability to manipulate and outwit, become advantages in the never-ending struggle for power. Every individual uses all of the resources at their disposal to emerge victorious and modern women keep sexuality close at hand. In Irene's case, her sexiness is brainy.

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