



Rex Stout: Sherlockian Extraordinaire **By Dan Andriacco**

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This talk is dedicated to the memory of my friend John McAleer. His authoritative biography of Rex Stout was a major source of inspiration and information for me.

Perhaps it's hard to recall now the shock, skepticism, cynicism, derision, and even scorn that greeted the announcement in 2012 that the actress Lucy Liu would play the part of Dr. Watson in the CBS program "Elementary."

But one of the great mystery writers of the twentieth century wouldn't have even lifted an eyebrow at the news that "Watson Was a Woman." For Rex Stout knew that decades ago. On January 31, 1941, at the dinner meeting of the Baker Street Irregulars in New York's Murray Hill Hotel, guest-of-honor Stout declined to toast "the Second Mrs. Watson." In his talk that followed, he unveiled his now-famous heresy that "the Watson person" who wrote the Canon was actually Mrs. Sherlock Holmes. Frederic Dannay, writing as Ellery Queen in the book *In the Queen's Parlor*, called Stout's speech an H-Bomb – H for Holmes, of course.

Speaking from notes, Stout cited many passages from the Sacred Writings that sounded to him as if they were written by a woman, and especially a wife. These included "I believe that I am one of the most long-suffering of mortals" and "I must have fainted" and "the relations between us in those days were peculiar." The *coup de grace*, however, was an acrostic spelling out IRENE WATSON from the first letters of canonical tales. The esoteric method by which he arrived at the

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order of these stories was – shall we say – sketchy. Stout insisted at the end of his speech that the wedding related in “A Scandal in Bohemia” was actually Holmes’s own, and speculated that the fruit of the union might have been Lord Peter Wimsey.

This was far from what BSI secretary Edgar W. Smith had expected. His invitation to Stout had suggested that the latter might speak in defense of Holmes against a literary assault by British author Somerset Maugham.

“As Rex reached his last sentence,” John McAleer reported, “pandemonium ensued.” He added: “In certain quarters 1941 would be remembered as the year that began with the Stout hypothesis and ended with Pearl Harbor – two nightmarish happenings.”

In his highly entertaining novel *Baker Street Irregular*, Jon Lellenberg imagines Christopher Morley saying this about a near-riot that followed Stout’s talk: “Some called for tar and feathers while others wished to proceed directly to the lynching. Rex is lucky it’s hard to find a good-sized tree in this part of Manhattan.”

The controversy went far beyond the 26 Irregulars gathered for the dinner. *The World-Telegraph* and *The New York Times* noted the matter in conjunction with a written version of Stout’s thesis that appeared in the March 1, 1941 *Saturday Review of Literature*.

Stout, perhaps wisely, didn’t attend the BSI dinner the following year. But that didn’t get him off the hook. Harvey Officer’s toast “To Dr. Watson’s Second Wife” took dead aim at the mystery writer. The final verses proclaimed:

The toasts we propose are Conanic,
 “The Woman,” “Dame Hudson,” and she
 Whom Stout, in a thesis satanic
 Declared non-existent to be.

His eloquent words failed to end her,
To her memory still we are true,
So, convinced of his masculine gender,
Let's drink to his wife number two!

Then, as one of several talks that evening, Dr. Julian Wolff offered an official BSI rebuttal called "That Was No Lady." He began by saying:

Upon entering into a literary controversy with Mr. Stout, one is immediately conscious of being at a great disadvantage. It would require the knowledge and the pen of an Edgar Smith, the experience and the skill of a Vincent Starrett, as well as the genius and the beard of a Christopher Morley, to equalize the contest.

Wolff proved equal to the task, however. His response included an acrostic of his own that spelled out NUTS TO REX STOUT.

Stout's heretical foray and Wolff's rejoinder were both published in *Profile by Gaslight* in 1944. When one considers that this classic reader was a BSI project edited by the redoubtable Edgar W. Smith, it becomes clear that the Sherlockian outrage was about as authentic as Stout's Sherlockian scholarship.

Long an admirer of Stout's Nero Wolfe corpus, I wrote Stout a letter when I was just 14 years old, asking him which story he considered his best and positing the bold theory that Wolfe's own "Watson" – Archie Goodwin – was the true author of "Watson Was a Woman."

Stout fired back an ingenious response dated December 8, 1966. The postage on the note was five cents, but to me the contents have always been priceless. "Dear Master Dan," Stout wrote, "If your surmise, that Archie Goodwin wrote that gem, 'Watson Was a Woman,' is correct, I would be silly to admit it, and I try not

to be silly. So the answer to your question, what do I consider my best story, is ‘Watson Was a Woman.’ Sincerely, Rex Stout.”

Clearly, Stout liked to have fun with Sherlock Holmes. But he did so as a true believer. Born in 1886 in Noblesville, Ind., Stout began reading Holmes as a boy and devoured the later stories as they were being published. In 1903, having moved to Kansas at a young age, he saw William Gillette portray Sherlock Holmes at a Kansas City theater. He returned again the next night.

More than a generation later, in 1931, Stout found himself among a select group of men drinking bootleg bourbon with Winston Churchill at a hotel in New York until the wee hours of the morning. One of the subjects of their conversation was Sherlock Holmes. Stout was forty-five years old, and Arthur Conan Doyle had died only the year before – just three years after the publication of his final Sherlock Holmes story. Stout went on to create Nero Wolfe not long after. The inaugural novel of the Corpus, *Fer-de-lance*, was published in 1934, the same year Christopher Morley founded the Baker Street Irregulars.

Stout was not an early member, but his relationship with the BSI was a long and happy one despite “Watson Was a Woman.” His name appears in the official minutes of the annual dinner repeatedly over the years, often as master of ceremonies and/or as a judge of the Morley-Montgomery Award. In 1947, he “expounded upon the love life of Mr. Moriarty.” In 1948, he toasted “*the woman*.” In 1949, he was given the investiture name of “The Boscombe Valley Mystery.” In 1953, he presided over the annual dinner in lieu of the missing Christopher Morley. By 1959, he was such a regular Irregular that the minutes noted his absence due to illness. By that quirk of fate, which I’m sure Stout regretted for the rest of his long life, he missed the investiture that year of one Black Peter.

Stout and his wife, Pola, attended the BSI's Silver Blaze Stakes at Belmont Race Track for the first five years of its existence, starting in 1960, presenting the trophy in two of those years.

Julian Wolff, as commissionaire of the BSI, created the Two-Shilling Award for "extraordinary devotion to the cause beyond the call of duty" in 1962 and bestowed the first one on his old nemesis Stout. Perhaps not coincidentally, the minutes record that Rex Stout that year proposed the toast to "the second Mrs. Watson" – the toast he had refused to share twenty-one years earlier. In 1967, the BSI honored Stout with a one-off award called "the Order of the Blue Carbuncle." That was also the year that Pola was toasted as "*the woman*."

But Stout's speaking and writing about Sherlock Holmes was never limited to the relatively narrow confines of the BSI or even the broader Sherlockian community.

For example, while appearing on a radio program with Jacques Barzun and early Irregular Elmer Davis in January 1941 – the same month he dropped the H-bomb on the BSI – he made this observation: "The modern detective story puts off its best tricks till the last, but Doyle always put his best tricks first and that's why they're still the best ones." Later in the same program, he said, "It is impossible for any Sherlock Holmes story not to have at least one marvelous scene."

A few years later, in 1949, Stout wrote an article called "Grim Fairy Tales" for *Saturday Review*, in which he tried to explain why "Sherlock Holmes is the most widely known fictional character in all the literature of the world." And this was his conclusion:

"Sherlock Holmes is the embodiment of man's greatest pride and his greatest weakness: his reason . . . He is human aspiration. He is what our ancestors had in mind when in wistful bragging they tacked the *sapiens* onto the *homo*."

Stout added to this a more general statement which McAleer suggested could apply to Nero Wolfe and to Rex Stout himself. He wrote:

We enjoy reading about people who love and hate and covet – about gluttons and martyrs, misers and sadists, whores and saints, brave men and cowards. But also, demonstrably, we enjoy reading about a man who gloriously acts and decides, with no exception and no compunction, not as his emotions brutally command, but as his reason instructs.

As an editorial footnote, I have to say that I find this assertion beautifully stated and possibly even true, **but inapplicable to Sherlock Holmes**. Famous though the Great Detective is for finding all emotions abhorrent, *in practice* he acts out of emotion with great regularity – such as when he sets thieves and murderers free, when he sends orange pips to the killers of John Openshaw, when he cries out and threatens Killer Evans for having shot Watson, when he refuses a more valuable fee and asks for a portrait of Irene Adler in return for his service to the King of Bohemia . . . need I go on? But I digress.

In an introduction to *The Later Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, published in 1952, Stout wrote of Holmes: “We are not supposed to reach real intimacy with him. We are not supposed to touch him.” He argued that the success of the Canon depended on what he called “the grand and glorious portrait” of Holmes, which transcended the author’s plot errors. How does that work? “No one will ever penetrate it to the essence and disclose it naked to the eye,” Stout concluded. “For the essence is magic, and magic is arcane.”

Stout wrote eloquently about Holmes again in 1963 for the cover of a record album of Basil Rathbone reading Holmes stories.

“Holmes,” Stout wrote, “is a man, not a puppet. As a man he has many vulnerable spots, like us; he is vain, prejudiced, intolerant; he is a drug addict; he

even plays the violin for diversion – one of the most deplorable outrages of self-indulgence.”

But, Stout went on, there is much more to him than that: “He loves truth and justice more than he loves money or comfort or safety or pleasure, or any man or woman. Such a man has never lived, so Sherlock Holmes will never die.”

Neither – I submit – will Rex Stout’s most famous creation, Nero Wolfe. And since the obese sleuth’s 1934 debut, readers and critics have drawn parallels between the two detectives. More than that, they have put them on the same family tree by speculating that Wolfe is the son of Sherlock or, less frequently, **Mycroft** Holmes. Certainly, Wolfe **looks** like Mycroft. And in the novel *Baker Street Irregular*, Stout says that the character was based on Mycroft – although Lellenberg told me that dialogue was pure invention.

In October 1954, as they appeared together at a book signing at Kann’s Department Store in Washington, D.C., Frederic Dannay asked Stout how he came up with the name Nero Wolfe. According to Dannay, Stout thought for a while and then said that he based the name on Sherlock Holmes. In McAleer’s version, Stout was just quoting a theory by Alexander Woollcott. But how do the two names relate? Dannay explained it this way in his book *In the Queen’s Parlor*:

both names have the same number and the same distribution of syllables: Sherlock has two, Holmes one; Nero likewise has two, Wolfe one. But this is a superficial kinship: the relationship is far more subtle. Consider the vowels, and their placement, in the name Sherlock Holmes. Sherlock has two – e and o, in that order; Holmes also has two – the same two, but in reverse order – o-e. Now consider the vowels in Nero Wolfe: Nero has two – the same two as in Sherlock, and in exactly the same order! Wolfe also has two – the same two as in Holmes, and again in the same reverse order!

Dannay called this “the great O-E theory,” and mused that it probably all went back to P-O-E. Clearly, Rex Stout was not the only one having fun with Sherlock Holmes.

William S. Baring-Gould, in his biography *Nero Wolfe of West 35th Street*, mentions the great O-E theory in passing in a chapter called “Alias Nero Wolfe,” in which he argues that Wolfe is the son of Sherlock Holmes and Irene Adler. Frankly, in my opinion, Baring-Gould’s attempt to prove a genetic connection between the two detectives rather limps. For example, in listing similarities between the two men, Baring-Gould writes: “In his youth, Nero Wolfe, like Sherlock Holmes, was an athlete.” This is proof?

As the Holmes-Wolfe connection kept being proposed over the years, Stout came up with a number of amusing ways of saying, in effect, “leave me out of this.” As early as 1935, in a letter to the editor of *The Baker Street Journal*, he pleaded client confidentiality in his role as Archie Goodwin’s literary agent. In 1968, he wrote to Bruce Kennedy, “Since the suggestion that Nero Wolfe is the son of Sherlock Holmes was merely someone’s loose conjecture, I think it is proper and permissible for me to ignore it.” A couple of years later he wrote to another admirer, “As for the notion that he [Wolfe] was sired by Sherlock Holmes, I don’t believe Archie Goodwin has ever mentioned it.”

And yet Archie Goodwin notes in *Fer-de-Lance* that he, Archie, has a picture of Sherlock Holmes over his desk. On August 12, 1969, John McAleer asked Stout: “*Did Archie hang up the picture of Sherlock Holmes that is found over his desk, or did Wolfe put it there?*” Stout’s response was typically unequivocal: “I was a damn fool to do it. Obviously it’s always an artistic fault in any fiction to mention any other character in fiction. It should never be done.”

Another interesting picture in the Wolfe establishment on West 35th Street is the painting of a waterfall, behind which Archie and others often hide in a secret

alcove to observe and hear the goings-on in Wolfe's office. According to McAleer, Stout surmised that the painting represented the Reichenbach Falls.

If Stout guessed correctly, this is quite appropriate – for Nero Wolfe and Sherlock Holmes both battled a criminal genius to the death. Professor Moriarty, a figure as archetypical in popular mythology as Holmes himself, is a significant presence in “The Final Problem” and *The Valley of Fear*. His shadow looms large over “The Adventure of the Empty House.” He is also mentioned in three other stories. Arnold Zeck, Moriarty's counterpart in the world of Nero Wolfe, has speaking parts in the novels *And Be a Villain* and *The Second Confession* and appears in the third book of the trilogy, *In the Best Families*.

Ira Brad Matetsky's recent introduction to *The Zeck Trilogy* neatly sums up the parallels between the two archvillains: “Zeck, like Moriarty, is the hidden face beyond a vast underworld empire; Zeck, like Moriarty, begins to appear in more and more of the detective's business; Zeck, like Moriarty, becomes an ongoing threat to the detective's life and livelihood; Zeck, like Moriarty, ultimately inspires the detective to abandon his usual habits and take radical steps to deal with him.”

Wolfe foresees those steps early on.

“I'll tell you this,” he says to Archie in *And Be a Villain*. “If ever, in the course of my business, I find that I am committed against him and must destroy him, I shall leave this house, find a place where I can work – and sleep and eat if there is time for it – and stay there until I have finished. I don't want to do that, and therefore I hope I will never have to.”

But he does. *In the Best Families* is a kind of “Final Problem” and “Empty House” in one epic novel – epic not in size, but in terms of its significance to the Wolfe Corpus. Wolfe isn't believed dead in the book, but he might as well be. He leaves the brownstone on West 35th Street with the door wide open and a strong indication that he will never be back. When he does return, months later, Archie

doesn't recognize him. Physically he's a mere shadow of his former one-seventh of a ton, his face full of seams from the weight loss. His resolve and mental resources are undiminished, however. And by the last page, Zeck is as dead as Moriarty.

Surprisingly, Stout told McAleer more than once that this story arc wasn't planned – that he didn't know for sure when he wrote *And Be a Villain* that Zeck would reappear in another book. That would mean, then, that he wasn't **intentionally** paying homage to Reichenbach and *The Return*. But who can doubt that Stout was influenced by the death and resurrection of Sherlock Holmes, however subconsciously?

Nor is this by any means the only impact the Canon had on Rex Stout and Nero Wolfe. As John McAleer wrote:

In Rex's appreciation of Doyle's art, we find valuable guidelines for understanding Rex's own art. He saw the necessity of making Wolfe a man rich in human contradictions. Wolfe's eccentricities surpass those of Holmes. At times he is childish in his moods. He shuts his eyes more often than Holmes does to "moral issues." More than once he "arranges" for the suicide of a culprit, to save himself a court appearance. Yet, withal, even as Holmes is, he is "grand and glorious."

Importantly, Wolfe also has a sidekick without whom he would be just another genius sleuth. The parallels between John H. Watson, M.D., and Archie Goodwin may not be immediately obvious, but they are strong. Like Watson, Archie is:

- His boss's Boswell (what's widely known as a "Watson" in crime fiction circles);
- A man of action;
- A ladies man;

- The one who always carries a gun (although Holmes occasionally does, too);
- A colorful and interesting character, unlike S.S. Van Dine or the unnamed “T” of Poe’s Dupin stories; and
- A conductor of light, if not himself luminous.

In this matter of a narrator assistant, Stout’s debt to Conan Doyle was conscious and acknowledged. In *The Mystery Writer’s Handbook*, a 1956 volume from the Mystery Writers of America, Stout wrote an article called “What to Do About a Watson.” He argued that a Watson helps solve what he called “your main technical difficulty” of having the detective hero learn information that the author isn’t ready to share with the reader. “A Watson can be a devil of a nuisance at times,” he wrote, “but he is worth it for his wonderful cooperation in clearing the toughest hurdle on the course.”

As an example, Stout cited this exchange from “The Red-Headed League”:

“Evidently,” said I, “Mr. Wilson’s assistant counts for a good deal in this mystery of the Red-headed League. I am sure that you inquired your way merely in order that you might see him.”

“Not him.”

“What then?”

“The knees of his trousers.”

“And what did you see?”

“What I expected to see.”

“Why did you beat the pavement?”

“My dear doctor, this is a time for observation, not for talk.”

And then Stout added – gleefully, in my imagination – “That’s the way to do it!”

Nobody who has ever read Rex Stout's mysteries could deny that he wrote in his own unique way. But he was also operating under the spell of Arthur Conan Doyle's arcane magic.

The great private eye novelist Ross Macdonald expressed the opinion of many critics when he wrote:

Rex Stout is one of the half-dozen major figures in the development of the American detective novel. With great wit and cunning, he devised a form which combined the traditional virtues of Sherlock Holmes and the English school with the fast-moving vernacular narrative of Dashiell Hammett.

Stout did this brilliantly, and over a 41-year period. But, in a sense, Conan Doyle was there before him. While the first part of *The Valley of Fear* is an exemplar of "Sherlock Holmes and the English school," the flashback story of Birdy Edwards in Vermissa Valley, U.S.A. is arguably – as Steven Doyle asserts in *Sherlock Holmes for Dummies* – "the world's first hard-boiled detective story."

So even in his best known and most enduring contribution to the American detective story, Rex Stout walked in the footsteps of a giant.

Thank you.