

THE MODERN IRENE ADLER'S - DO THEY LIVE UP TO THE ORIGINAL?

CINDY BROWN, THE CREW OF THE BARQUE LONE STAR

If there is a character from the Sherlockian canon who is ripe for translation onto the stage or screen, it is Irene Adler. She is beautiful, resourceful, courageous, strong-willed, impulsive and compassionate. There are few writers, or actresses, who would not relish a role with such qualities. However, when it came to translate Doyle's works, Miss Adler, like many women of her day, was often cast aside in favor of a more important male character, the ever nasty Professor Moriarty.

Irene's presence reverberates strongly, and the dramatic potential of her role as the woman in Holmes's life was destined to influence many Sherlockian stage works. Despite her brief appearance in *Scandal*, she remains one of the most talked-about Doyle characters, in large part because she evoked in Holmes, qualities that all readers can sympathize with: attraction, admiration, and even love. In *Scandal*, Watson states that "love is a quality that Holmes cannot possess", yet Watson seems to have missed the clues nestled within his own narrative. As Holmes says to him in this very same story, "You see, but you do not observe."

Many of the Adler candidates, were glamorous and boldly unconventional. It is important to point out that while in some circles such women were thought of, as kept women of the stage, or grandes horizontals, in others they were considered liberated women who simply rejected the social mores of the day. Miss Adler states at the end of *Scandal* that she often dresses in male costume to "...take advantage of the freedom it gives me." Some may believe that this alludes to her trouser roles on the operatic stage, but it is consistent with the view that she is a woman ahead of her time

A series of mystery novels written by Carole Nelson Douglas features Irene Adler as the protagonist and sleuth, doing a chronicle of her life shortly before (in the novel *Good Night, Mr. Holmes*) and after her notable encounter with Sherlock Holmes and which feature Holmes as a supporting character.

Let's look at a few of the women who have portrayed Irene Adler over the years.

1. In the 1916 "Sherlock Holmes" Alice Faulkner played Irene in the famous William Gillette play in which Holmes and Faulkner fall in love. In the 1922 version of "Sherlock Holmes" Alice Faulkner and John Barrymore, are in this second adaptation of the William Gillette play, and in this version Holmes literally falls into Faulkner's arms.





In the 1965 Broadway play called Baker Street, Inga Swenson played Adler to Fritz Weaver's Holmes. Swenson, an American-born stage and screen actress, who had just been nominated for a Tony award for her performance in the musical "110 in the Shade", and been nominated again for "Baker Street" (though she would not win either time.) The extravagant production was received well by both critics and Sherlockians, but it failed to catch fire with the public at large.

2. In "Sherlock Holmes' Smarter Brother", a (1975) movie, Madeline Kahn plays in this zany low-brow comedy which was written, directed, and starring Gene Wilder. Kahn is an inverse Irene Adler, neither elegant nor demure, a bad liar and a raucous, sexually suggestive music hall singer. Maybe Irene in her younger days.



3. In the 1976 film "Sherlock Holmes in New York", Adler was played by Charlotte Rampling, opposite Roger Moore. She helps Holmes and Watson solve a bank robbery organized by Holmes nemesis, Professor Moriarty, after he takes her son hostage to prevent Holmes investigating the case. Holmes and Watson later rescue the boy, with a final conversation between Holmes and Adler at case conclusion implying that Holmes may be the boy's father.



4. In "The Mask of Death" a 1984 movie, Irene is played by Anne Baxter. Holmes is played by Peter Cushing. Holmes meets Adler when he is investigating a supposed kidnapping. Irene is neither an adversary nor romantic figure here. This would turn out to be Baxter's last role before her death.



5. In the BBC 1984 Granada series, Gayle Hunnicutt plays Irene Adler with grace and distinction, which is quite the opposite of some of the other interpretations we've gotten over the years. She's clever and intelligent, more than a match for Sherlock Holmes. Yes, she's beautiful, but



perhaps it is her mind, as well as her beauty, Sherlock Holmes was taken with, in "A Scandal in Bohemia". Gayle Hunnicutt plays Irene Adler as the Doyle version, a former opera singer. She is rich, smart, and attractive, getting the attention of a King. She does not exchange with criminals, as other versions would have her do. The portrayal is simple and understated, unlike most other versions. She's simply a smart woman and that's it. She seems to be around Jeremy Brett's age at the time of the episode, but they don't interact much during the episode, which is a shame.

6. "Sherlock Holmes and the Leading Lady", (1992) stars Morgan Fairchild as Irene Adler and Christopher Lee as Holmes. The soap opera star Fairchild plays an Adler whose romance with Holmes lead her to propose marriage, the realism of which is not helped by the fact that Lee was 68 at the time and she was 31-year-old.



7. In "A Royal Scandal", (2001) Irene Adler is played by Liliana Komorowska. This rather muddled affair is summed up perfectly in the scene where Adler holds Holmes (Matt Frewer) at gunpoint, only to seduce him moments later. It seems like Hollywood, just can't help itself.

8. Rachel McAdams plays Adler in the 2009 movie version "Sherlock Holmes", with Robert Downey Jr. She is a professional thief and the events of the movie takes place sometime after "A Scandal in Bohemia", because Holmes already has a photo of her. She is apparently killed off in "A Game of Shadow", the 2011 sequel, in order for Holmes to show emotion, for once in the movie series... She's not an opera singer in this version and seems more commonplace than graceful. In this film, she is a skilled professional thief, as well as a divorcee. It is known that she knew Holmes prior to the events of the film. In this aspect, the film considerably departs from Doyle's original, where Holmes never met Adler again after the one occasion where she outwitted (and greatly impressed) hmmm; the film conversely implies that the two of them met many times and later had an intermittent, hotly consummated love affair. She and Holmes are depicted as having a deep and mutual infatuation, even while she is employed by Moriarty.



9. The BBC version "Sherlock" dated 2012, is played by Lara Pulver. I'm not sure if this is the most notorious version of Irene but it is up there. She is a dominatrix and attempts to confuse the highly intellectual Sherlock Holmes with her naked body. While many considered it a great episode, including myself, it was also heavily criticized at the time. Holmes seeks to recover scandalous photos of a liaison between Adler and a female member of the Royal family. This story line may very well be based on true British mystery, the 1971 Lloyds Bank Safe Deposit Box Robbery.



10. The CBS version of Elementary, Irene Adler is played by Natalie Dormer, who is really Moriarty in disguise. This one is really just bizarre. She is eccentric, but is probably the most arrogant Irene Adler out of all of them. She's an artist and a criminal mastermind, using male agents to stand in as Moriarty while she plots behind the scenes as the real thing. She probably wouldn't be caught dead at the opera.



WHO IS ADLER REALLY

This woman is crafty and intelligent, capturing the attention of Sherlock Holmes. To him, she is known only as "The Woman", a designation of honor and allure. However, her place of distinction is tarnished somewhat in other productions, as she's portrayed as a silly thief or dominatrix.

All of the versions of Irene Adler are different but I really dislike the belittling nature in which Irene Adler is portrayed sometimes. She can't just be a smart woman who has the wit to out think Sherlock Holmes, no she has to be a dominatrix or an over the top criminal mastermind. As Carol Nelson Douglas commented "That's disappointing". Hopefully, future versions will consider Irene Adler a complement to Sherlock Holmes, and worthy of the title of "the Woman".

On the plus side, these 21st Century Adler's are action oriented-- but in several key ways, they actually seem more old-fashioned than Doyle's original. Why is Doyle's Irene Adler so much better than the versions crafted by Steven Moffat and Guy Ritchie?

Irene Adler is exceptional to modern audiences because she was exceptional to Holmes himself. He refers to her as "The Woman" because to Holmes who is described as a chivalrous and a misogynist, she transcended and eclipsed the rest of her sex.

It's no wonder that her character tends to be included in any modern Sherlock Holmes franchise. She's appeared in Guy Ritchie's Sherlock Holmes films, and she's turned up in the episode of the Sherlock BBC TV series entitled, " A Scandal in Belgravia." Modern creators translate this exceptionalism into something more sensational and action-packed than Doyle ever wrote, but in most modern stories, Adler's character is more old-fashioned than in Doyle's day.

What's the first tip-off scene, in both modern versions? When she takes off her clothes in front of Holmes to rattle him into making a mistake. This is very much in the "feminine wiles" vein, which looks great on camera, but doesn't make too much sense. The original Irene was far more progressive and canny. She knows the best way to throw Holmes off- and it's not sex.

"A Scandal in Bohemia" outlines the strong points Adler possesses as a character. She's not the great detective Holmes is, but she is able to assess a situation critically, notice what's fishy about it, and act quickly.

Thought out the story, she's in command of the situation, initiating the threat to the King, finding a man she loves better, marrying him, and heading out of the country when she wants to break off the game

with Holmes and his royal client. The story also shows how Irene and Sherlock have an intellectual kinship. They've both unmasked a fraud (the King, who at first, came to Holmes, in disguise) they both know a set-up when they see it, and they both have a flair for dramatic disguises.

What's more, the story exposes Holmes's weakness as a detective---he tends to assume the worst of people. This is also shown in his greatest failure, "The Adventure of the Yellow Face," where he gets the solution to a case entirely wrong because he didn't figure on dealing with honorable people.

And that's the big twist in the Irene Adler case--she's a completely honorable person. Even the King, who has every reason to fear her, has complete faith in her decent nature once she's promised to him she won't interfere with his life. And according to C. N. Douglas, this is what launches Doyle's story well ahead of its time.

Doyle does not imply low character, criminal tendencies, or inferior intellect. But she's a clever, unconventional, take-charge, and seductive woman, and that's unreservedly, a good thing.

Not so in the modern day Sherlock's. In both media series, Irene Adler is not simply an admirable person with a taste for sleuthery and adventure. In the movie series, she's both a woman who marries rich men for a living and she's also a thief-though why she'd need both professions is never made clear.

In the BBC TV series, she's a dominatrix who dabbles in blackmail and international terrorist intrigue (on the side of the terrorist). The Irene character from the BBC series and from the movies, lean very heavily on sexuality and criminality. Both characters aim their sexuality squarely at the hero, to their inevitable costs.

And both modern Irene Adler's have an even bigger strike against them. While the original Adler was independent, they're both pawns of Moriarty. The movie Adler is a sort of cross between a messenger girl and sexual bait for Holmes.

Letting them throw a punch or carry a whip doesn't update that archetype. It takes something stronger. But why bother with that when Irene Adler can get naked on camera, bat her eyes at Sherlock Holmes and be rescued at the end.

So we can welcome the 21st Century film versions which include Irene Adler. Yet Doyle's 1888 creation is far more liberated than the Irene Adler of modern male writer/directors. Gone is the supposition that Holmes never would consummate anything more than a case, so Irene Adler becomes the nearest romantic object, always sexy and always in need of rescuing in the end.

So in my opinion, the 1984 Brett/Gayle Hunnicutt PBS version of Scandal remains the gold standard with an Adler both classy and clever. But nonetheless, pick your own favorite, but enjoy them all.
