Daily Bread: Food and Drink in the Holmes Canon
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Abstract: The genre of the detective story adheres a kind of literary realism, and thus represents facets of everyday life, such as eating or drinking. The diet of Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson is represented within the canon of the Holmes stories, and food and drink also appear as clues which Holmes can 'read', as part of the inductive process which will solve the mystery.

While in the Sherlock Holmes canon Watson is married twice (and once widowed), the domestic scenario most frequently staged by the stories sees Holmes and Watson sharing 221b Baker Street, attended by their housekeeper Mrs Hudson.[1] Holmes himself nostalgically looks back to this ménage when he reunites with Watson after seeming to return from the dead at the beginning of *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*: '"This is indeed like the old days,'" adding '"We shall have time for a mouthful of dinner before we need go."'[2]

Watson repeatedly declares Holmes to be a superhuman genius, unique amongst his species. Holmes is a superb aberration as a human being: highly intelligent and knowledgeable, yet of peculiar habits, averse to social contact, especially with the opposite sex, and ignorant of knowledge of different kinds of everyday things, as Watson famously (if not consistently with the rest of the canon) enumerates in *A Study in Scarlet*. Holmes's extraordinariness is a necessity for his solving of outré crimes that are themselves often extraordinary, before he, and the world, return to the non-narratable tedium of the everyday.[3] One sphere of human activity, however, in which even Holmes must be to some extent ordinarily human, is in the consumption of food and drink. While Holmes can choose to refrain from many kinds of social activity, from friendships (apart from with Watson), and from sexual relationships of all kinds, it is impossible for him wholly to abjure food and drink.

While literary realism might claim a degree of completeness in the making of its fictional universe, there will always of course be some omissions in its representations. An author or a narrator is not obliged to show their characters eating or drinking any more than to describe them sleeping, which offers little in the way of narrative possibilities, or to show them urinating or excreting, the taboo nature of these processes making their mimesis much rarer in fiction

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[1] Guy Adams suggests, intriguingly, that in the twenty-first-century adaptation *Sherlock*, Mrs Hudson used to be the proprietor of the sandwich shop beneath Holmes's and Watson's flat before retiring from catering following her husband's execution. *Sherlock: The Casebook* (London: BBC Books, 2012), p. 15.

[2] Arthur Conan Doyle, 'The Adventure of the Empty House', *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Illustrated Short Stories* (London: Chancellor Press, 1985), pp. 433-49 (p. 437).

[3] See Laurie Langbauer, 'The City, the Everyday, and Boredom: the Case of Sherlock Holmes', Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies 5 (1993), 80-120.

written between Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). Showing characters eating and drinking, therefore, is a kind of aesthetic choice, and one which will connote kinds of meaning to the fictional universe. Since Holmes's investigative method is predicated on his ability to deduct meaning from the examination of objects, of the surfaces of everyday life, then inevitably the texts' presentation of food and drink carry meaning beyond their merely epideictic existence within Conan Doyle's story world.[4] As Roland Barthes has suggested, even in everyday life objects such as food and clothing present a sign-system: while 'clothes are used for protection and food for nourishment' they also manifest themselves as signs.[5]

The most common meaning communicated by Conan Doyle's 'alimentary language' (Barthes, p. 41) in the Holmes canon is to mark adherence to or departure from everyday routine at the join, especially at mealtimes, between non-narratable everyday life and the beginning or the close of an adventure. The more domesticated Watson's personal life is at the place of a particular story in the canon's timeline, the more he expects mealtimes to be regular. The doctor's late breakfast in *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) is a sign of the dissipated status of his personal habits before his return to professional life. Holmes's absence from mealtimes can signal to Watson the depth of the detective's level of engagement with a particular case – and most certainly, the ordinariness or the extraordinariness of a particular day is most strongly marked by the meal taken at its start. For Watson's narration, breakfast truly is the most important meal of the day: the name of the meal occurs twenty-four times in *The Adventures*, plus one more morning toast and coffee, and twenty-two in *The Return*. The *Memoirs* open with Watson and Holmes breakfasting together prior to investigating the disappearance of Silver Blaze.[6] By the Bruce-Partington Plans' (1908), the formula for beginning a case, at the beginning of a day, has been well established:

> In the third week of November, in the year 1895, a dense yellow fog settled down upon London. From the Monday to the Thursday I doubt whether it was ever possible from our windows in Baker Street to see the loom of the opposite houses. The first day Holmes had spent in cross-indexing his huge book of references. The second and third had been patiently occupied upon a subject which he hand recently made his hobby—the music of the Middle Ages. But when, for the fourth time, after pushing back our chairs from

[4] See Roland Barthes, 'Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative', *Image-Music-Text*, translated by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 79-124.
[5] Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, translated by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), p. 41.
[6] For apparent inconsistencies across the canon for the timing of the day's first mealtime, see Ian McQueen, 'Breakfast at 221b', *Sherlock Holmes Detected: The Problems of the Long Stories* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1974), pp. 28-30. Watson's solicitousness for Holmes's consumption of breakfast is part of Rex Stout's evidence for his claim that Watson is in fact a woman married to Holmes: 'Watson Was a Woman', *The Saturday Review of Literature*, March 1, 1941.

> breakfast we saw the greasy, heavy brown swirl still drifting past us and condensing in oily drops upon the windowpanes, my comrade's impatient and active nature could endure this drab existence no longer.[7]

In more than one story, the anxiety of a client to contact Holmes is signaled by their arrival at, or even before, breakfast time. The reimposing of a regular breakfast regime following the solution of each case marks the return of the story-world to the stable regularity of the quotidian, and of which Holmes will in turn eventually weary, craving in turn the excitement and disruption of the next case. In 'The Adventure of the Devil's Foot' (1910), Holmes is so excited by learning of the death of Mortimer Tregennis during the night that he immediately decides to postpone breakfast, as he does in the 'Three Students' (1904); 'The Blue Carbuncle' (1892) has a dinner postponed into a supper so a trail can be pursued before it goes cold.

One of the ways by which Watson singles out Holmes as an unusual human being is in attributing to him a pronounced abstemiousness. In 'The Missing Three-Quarter' (1904), Holmes's face is described as 'ascetic', and the slim figure depicted both in the narrative and in Paget's illustrations is not that of a keen eater and imbiber (in contrast to the corpulent build of Sherlock's physically indolent brother Mycroft).[8] Watson claims in 'The Yellow Face' (1893) that Holmes's 'diet was usually of the sparest, and his habits were simple to the point of austerity'.[9] Holmes's ability to conquer appetite is one of the superhuman capacities that allow him to be a successful detective, undistracted, when necessary, by bodily needs. 'The 'Norwood Builder' (1903) shows Holmes refining this capacity further in order to prosecute the revelation of the case:

> My friend had no breakfast himself, for it was one of his peculiarities that in his more intense moments he would permit himself no food, and I have known him presume upon his iron strength until he has fainted from pure inanition.[10]

Holmes chooses to privileges the brain over the rest of the body when a case requires it, using tobacco in 'The Mazarin Stone' (1921) to inhibit his appetite:

> "You have not, I hope, learned to despise my pipe and my lamentable tobacco? It has to take the place of food these days."
> "But why not eat?"
> "Because the faculties become refined when you starve them. Why, surely, as a doctor, my dear Watson, you must admit that what your digestion gains in the way of blood supply is so much lost to the brain. I am a brain,

[7] 'The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans', *Short Stories*, pp. 702-23 (p. 702).
[8] 'The Adventure of the Missing Three-Quarter', *Short Stories*, pp. 616-33 (p. 616).
[9] 'The Adventure of the Yellow Face', *Short Stories*, pp. 269-83 (p. 269).
[10] 'The Adventure of the Norwood Builder', *Short Stories*, pp. 450-69 (p. 461-62_.

> Watson. The rest of me is a mere appendix. Therefore, it is the brain I must consider."[11]

In 'The Dying Detective' (1913), Holmes fakes fatal illness by refusing food and drink for three days, inanition used here as disguise like clothing and false hair elsewhere in the canon; following the solution of the case he restores himself with claret and biscuits.

As with a number of his friend's characteristics, however, Watson's estimate of Holmes's frugality is something of an exaggeration. Holmes has rare moments of epicureanism, which reveal themselves in much the same surprising way as the sudden appearance of decadent enthusiasms for French literature, Belgian modern art, or opera.[12] For Fletcher Pratt, Holmes is 'a genuine gourmet, in both food and wine'.[13] The detective breaks from his investigations of the topography of 'The Red-Headed League' by calling for '"A sandwich and a cup of coffee, and then off to violin-land, where all is sweetness and delicacy and harmony, and there are no red-headed clients to vex us with their conundrums."'[14] In 'Thor Bridge' (1922) Holmes minds enough to mention to Watson that their breakfast eggs have been hard-boiled because their new cook has been engrossed in reading a magazine.

At home, Watson's noting of Holmes's consumption of food is an indication of his solicitous concern for his friend's welfare. Food and drink and the rituals around them are a means of establishing bonds between this otherwise solitary man and other human beings. Perhaps even more surprisingly, Holmes considers hospitality to be an important virtue. In *The Sign of Four* (1890), Holmes insists that Watson should recognise his '"merits as a housekeeper"' by joining him and Athelney Jones for a dinner of '"oysters and a brace of grouse, with something a little choice in white wines"'.[15] Even across the chapter break, the three men continue to enjoy their dinner and the convivial conversation it inspires:

> Our meal was a merry one. Holmes could talk exceedingly well when he chose, and that night he did choose. He appeared to be in a state of nervous exaltation. I have never known him so brilliant. He spoke on a quick succession of subjects — on miracle plays, on medieval pottery, on Stradivarius violins, on the Buddhism of Ceylon, and on the warships of the future — handling each as though he had made a special study of it. His

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[11] 'The Adventure of the Mazarin Stone', *Short Stories*, pp. 805-20 (p. 806).
[12] Stephen Arata, *Fictions of Loss in the Victorian Fin-de-Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 144.
[13] Fletcher Pratt essay speculates on the likely recipes for the game birds which appear at the end of 'The Noble Batchelor', and the wine in the story's 'ancient and cobwebby bottles', concluding that it is likely to be Portuguese rose. Fletcher Pratt, 'The Gastronomic Holmes', in *Sherlock Holmes by Gas-Lamp: Highlights from the First Four Decades of* The Baker Street Journal, ed. Philip A. Shreffler (New York: Fordham University Press, 1989), pp. 71-76 (p. 71).
[14] 'The Red-Headed League', *Short Stories*, pp. 23-43 (p. 36).
[15] *The Sign of Four*, *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Illustrated Novels* (London; Chancellor Press, 1987), pp. 111-200 (p. 168).

> bright humour marked the reaction from his black depression of the preceding days. Athelney Jones proved to be a sociable soul in his hours of relaxation and faced his dinner with the air of a bon vivant. (*Sign of Four*, p. 168).

While Watson presents Holmes as habitually savagely solitary, the detective is at his most convivial when offering to share meals with other characters. He is at is most arch when offering breakfast to Percy Phelps in the conclusion of 'The Naval Treaty' (1893), when the covers of the breakfast dishes conceal ham and eggs, curried fowl, and the story's eponymous missing document.

While some cases might need starvation to sharpen the wits, others might require as an aid to ratiocination cocoa, or 'two large pots of coffee and an incredible amount of tobacco'.[16] Such are Holmes's physical exertions in 'The Naval Treaty' that he must fortify himself with sandwiches and brandy. When Holmes is on the verge of solving the mystery in *The Valley of Fear* (1914-15), he has 'a ravenous appetite for a high tea' which sees him 'exterminate' a total of four eggs.[17] The need to set out immediately in 'The Beryl Coronet' (1892) is so pressing that Holmes even has to forego butter or dripping:

> He cut a slice of beef from the joint upon the sideboard, sandwiched it between two rounds of bread, and thrusting this rude meal into his pocket he started off upon his expedition.[18]

At such points in the stories, Holmes's appetites allow a vigorous, appetitive, energetic masculinity (further proof of his superhumanness) to burst forth from the icy calmness Watson attributes as Holmes's normal state.

> Sherlock Holmes had not come back yet. It was nearly ten o'clock before he entered, looking pale and worn. He walked up to the sideboard, and tearing a piece from the loaf he devoured it voraciously, washing it down with a long draught of water.[19]

Of course, the most significant way in which food and drink make their presence felt in the stories is their constituting clues, as signs for Holmes (and occasionally Watson) to interpret. Holmes might understand sexual desire, but only by observation' his knowledge of physical nourishment comes, unavoidably, from some personal experience. Food and drink, like footprints, clothing and

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[16] *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, *Complete Novels*, pp. 203-352 (p. 225).
[17] *The Valley of Fear*, *Complete Novels*, pp. 355-496 (p. 402).
[18] 'The Adventure of the Beryl Coronet', pp. 186-204 (p. 199).
[19] 'The Five Orange Pips', *Short Stories*, pp. 79-93 (p. 92).

tobacco provide a further dataset of the surface of everyday life which Holmes can accumulate and analyse. In 'Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption', Roland Barthes asks:

> For what is food? It is not only a collection of products which can be used for nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behaviour. Information about food must be gathered wherever it can be found: by direct observation in the economy, in techniques, usages and advertising; and by indirect observation in the mental life of a society. And once these data are assembled, they should no doubt be subjected to a internal analysis that should try to establish what is significant about the way in which they have been assembled.[20]

For example, in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1901-2), the opening sees Holmes, 'usually very late in the mornings, save upon those not infrequent occasions when he was up all night (…) seated at the breakfast table' (p. 203). The novel closes, following the solution of the mystery, with Holmes victoriously inviting Watson to Meyerbeer's opera *Les Huguenots* and 'to Marcini's for a little dinner on the way' (p. 352). (Seven further breakfasts and six more dinners punctuate the plot's temporal unfolding.) The presences of Selden as well as Holmes on the moor are betrayed by the need of both criminal and detective for fresh food (bread and meat), Watson catching the butler Barrymore signaling to his brother-in law, and the belligerent neighbor Frankland's telescope espying the child who brings food.

> The ashes of a fire were heaped in a rude grate. Beside it lay some cooking utensils and a bucket half-full of water. A litter of empty tins showed that the place had been occupied for some time, and I saw, as my eyes became accustomed to the checkered light, a pannikin and a half-full bottle of spirits standing in the corner. In the middle of the hut a flat stone served the purpose of a table, and upon this stood a small cloth bundle—the same, no doubt, which I had seen through the telescope upon the shoulder of the boy. It contained a loaf of bread, a tinned tongue, and two tins of preserved peaches. (*Baskervilles,* p. 310)[21]

From these signs Watson concludes, without successfully identifying him, that the hut's inhabitant is 'of Spartan habits and cared little for the comforts of life' (*Baskervilles,* p. 311); yet even a man as superhuman as Holmes cannot subsist

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[20] 2013, pp. 28-35 Ro Roland Barthes, 'Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption' (1976) in CarolC ounihan and Penny Van Esterik, Food and Culture: A Reader, 3rd ed., New York, London: utledge

[21] On the pejorative assocations of tinned food, see John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Projudice Amongs the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* (London: Faber, 1992), pp. 44-45.

indefinitely without, he himself confesses, '"a loaf of bread and a clean collar"' (*Baskervilles,* p. 314).

The 'Blue Carbuncle', in the Christmas number of the 1892 *Strand*, sees the heroes tracing a jewel thief through two apparently identical turkeys. The murder in 'Abbey Grange' (1904) is proved not to be the work of burglars by the presence of 'beeswing' (the powdery residue found in vintage wine) in one used wine glass instead of all three, and by the fact of the supposed burglars not having finished the bottle, as might be expected. The opening of 'Black Peter' (1904) sees an unusual use for a foodstuff as Holmes exercises before breakfast by energetically spearing a pig's carcass in order to assess the forensic evidence of a murder with a harpoon. The murder victim in this case is a retired sea captain and violent drunkard: Holmes identifies the murderer as a fellow sailor through his preference for rum over the more genteel brandy and whisky. (Watson's breakfast scrambled eggs go cold while Holmes wrestles with the guilty man).

In many stories in the canon, especially the later ones, the narratable, abject element that generates the story is a desire that is held to be excessive (usually for money, sometimes for drugs or alcohol) or otherwise abject (such as quasi-incestuous or inappropriate sexual desire). Watson's narration holds Holmes admirable for his capacity to repress his appetites; the detective, in turn, can solve crimes by perceiving illicit appetites in others. 'The Golden Pince-Nez' (1904) is solved by Holmes's noticing the professor appearing to consume 'a remarkably big breakfast' followed by 'a good dish of cutlets for his lunch'.[22] The excess weight of Jabez Balfour in 'The Red-Headed League' (1891) and Dr Thorneycroft Huxtable in 'The Priory School' (1904), who needs reviving from a dead faint with 'a glass of milk and a biscuit' identifies them as both pompous and imperceptive, thus taken advantage of by these stories' villains.[23] John Straker's household having curried mutton for their evening meal so he can drug his stable boy is sufficiently unusual, in 'Silver Blaze' (1892), for Holmes to perceive this choice as a significant clue, the Anglo-Indian meal a hint of colonial danger similar to Thaddeus Sholto's inappropriately Oriental décor or Dr Grimesby Roylott's animal menagerie in 'The Speckled Band' (1892).[24]

Consequently, the food that is least likely to be a clue of significance is that which is most ordinary: the diet of *Strand* readership, both literal and figurative, is a very standard, British middle-class one. [25] Food, of course, is only legible when it is not yet consumed: when put to their proper use, foodstuffs pass the boundaries of the body and are not even legible to Sherlock Holmes – indeed the

[22] 'The Golden Pince-Nez', *Short Stories*, pp. 597-615 (p. 609).
[23] 'The Adventure of the Priory School', *Short Stories*, pp. 508-32 (p. 508).
[24] On colonial return, see Yumna Siddiqui, 'The Cesspool of Empire: Sherlock Holmes and the Return of the Repressed', *Victorian Literature and Culture* 34 (2006), 233-47.
[25] On the *Strand* reading community, see Christopher Pittards's excellent ''Cheap, Healthful Literature: *The Strand Magazine*, Fictions of Crime, and Purified Reading Communities', *Victorian Periodicals Review* 40 (2007), 1-23; also Rosemary Jann, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes: Detecting Social Order* (New York, Twayne, 1995).

internal digestion of nutrition is a universally human process which erases the differences on which Holmes's methods depend.[26] Food and drink are thus of most significance when its matter is out of place: orange pips not in an orange but an envelope, a saucer of milk placed where, seemingly, it cannot be drunk, parsley seeping into butter not tided into the larder but left out in the sun…..

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[26] Jayne Elisabeth Archer, Richard Marggraf Tuley and Howard Thomas, *Food and the Literary Imagination* (New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 23-24.