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Revealing Concealment: Disguise as a Catalyst of Identity Confusion in Laurie King's Sherlockian Mary Russell Mysteries

Maddie Dirrim '21

Introduction

While the formation or understanding of anyone's identity is a long and difficult process dependent on many factors, this process has historically been especially difficult for women, who have faced constant pressure from society and stereotypes that have developed for many years. At the turn of the 20th century in England, women began to come into their identity as the "New Woman," and soon after, encountered the trials and tribulations of WWI ("Woman Question" 654). The expectations concerning their place in the workforce as well as their place in the home caused women to question their position in society and their true identities. This theme of female identity confusion is reflected in both Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories, written during the late Victorian Era, and Laurie R. King's Mary Russell Mysteries, written during the 20th and 21st centuries but set during WWI and the years after. Given that King wrote her series about 100 years later, one might be surprised to find that there are any connections between her novels and Conan Doyle's short stories related to the gender roles of the time period in which they were written. Nevertheless, both Conan Doyle's representation of women and King's have something in common: ambiguity. In his short stories featuring prominent female characters, Conan Doyle explores the

kind of identity confusion that women must have undergone through his ambiguous classification of women as victims, criminals, and detectives. He also utilizes this ambiguity to make a larger statement about gender roles during the Victorian Era. King also uses the ambiguity of her main character Mary Russell to comment on the patriarchal norms that were present during the time period of the story, around WWI. Despite Conan Doyle and King's shared quality of ambiguity of female characters, the way they express this ambiguity differs. Conan Doyle introduces various female characters among his short stories, ones that are featured in one story, then get left behind. Laurie King, on the other hand, uses her central female character, Mary Russell, to explore identity confusion. Even though King's novels are set during the Victorian Era, she also has knowledge of how gender roles have or have not evolved throughout real history. Conan Doyle both reinforces and challenges normative thinking about gender, but King mostly challenges the patriarchal norms that existed at the turn of the 20th century. King incorporates a more modern view of women with her main character of Mary Russell, whose identity and confusion about this identity contribute to conclusions about how she combats patriarchal norms and establishes a place in society as a non-normative woman, demonstrating the struggle that women faced at that point in history. The opposition to norms that King employs has nuances that go beyond anything Conan Doyle could achieve, given his narrative strategy, the focus of his tales, and his position in history.

In this essay, I explore how King's use of Mary Russell as the main character allows her to conduct a detailed examination of Russell's identity; it is often the mystery of the detective herself that keeps the reader

engaged in the story. This mystery is what I seek to examine. In later books from her mysteries – *O Jerusalem* and *A Letter of Mary* – King plays with the idea of disguise; the roles that Russell embodies ironically reveal aspects of her identity otherwise hidden from the reader and herself. These disguises underscore the uncertainty that exists within Russell as a non-normative female detective as well as the question of how a woman of the 20th and 21st century defines herself in relation to the long history of patriarchal norms. This uncertainty translates to a feeling of vulnerability in Russell, which is both emphasized as well as hidden by her numerous disguises. The identity confusion in prominent female characters in both Conan Doyle's stories and King's mysteries is illuminated by the ambiguous nature of their roles in detective fiction, manifested in the use of disguise, a staple of the genre.

Essay

A disguise is a costume, a mask, and a difference in appearance meant to conceal oneself and to prevent others from discovering one's true identity. This classic technique is employed in the detective fiction genre, notably in Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes series; Holmes is known for his clever costumes, complete with face prosthetics and a foreign accent. Laurie King's *Mary Russell Mysteries*, focusing on the wife of Sherlock Holmes, depicts Mary Russell as another master of disguise. In the case of the fifth novel in the series, *O Jerusalem*, King disguises Mary as Amir, a young Arab boy, as an unnamed helpless girl, and as a seductive version of herself – Miss Mary Russell. Through these disguises, several themes of duality emerge. These facades do protect Mary in some cases, but in others, they both make her vulnerable and reveal something about her character, including the fact that Mary struggles to

grapple with her own vulnerability, not only in her detective career, but also in her academic career. The disguises that Mary wears emphasize not only her reluctance to be vulnerable, but also her non-normativity. They also allow the reader to deduce certain things about both the perceiver of the disguise and the person wearing the disguise; those who employ disguises frequently have something to hide from themselves, not just their identity from another person. Most notably depicted in the first two novels of the Mary Russell series – *The Beekeeper's Apprentice* and *A Monstrous Regiment of Women* – the tensions and unresolved questions regarding women's roles and identities in the early 20th century are palpable. This uncertainty is represented via Mary's own personal identity crisis in later novels, a struggle that is inextricable from her social identity as a woman. The broader questions of women's identities, raised in the early novels of the series, come closer to being answered later on, as the reader gets a closer look into the individual identity of a non-normative woman such as Mary Russell. In the novel *O Jerusalem*, the duality of Mary's disguises and their contribution to identity confusion are explored; these various masks are protective yet increase vulnerability, and they reveal things about the self as well as others. An analysis of these disguises ultimately uncovers the complex nature of the Mary Russell series in its depiction of Mary as a non-normative woman and detective.

In *O Jerusalem*, Mary assumes one role more often than that of others: Amir, a young Arab boy who travels with Ali and Mahmoud. This disguise both protects her and renders her vulnerable. At first, Mahmoud refuses to clothe Mary in the traditional dress appropriate for a young boy; he says that she could be stoned for dressing like a man, but Holmes fires back by declaring that Mary will not be put in

a subservient position (King 25-26). From this exchange, several conclusions can be drawn. The reader sees the vulnerable position that Mary will be put in if she chooses to dress as a young boy; she faces the threat of physical consequences if she is caught. Yet Mary's non-normativity, which is highlighted by many of the disguises in this particular novel, makes her willing to take the risk. Holmes knows that Mary will refuse to dress as a woman, that she would prefer to assume the role of a young boy rather than a girl. By embodying the persona of Amir, she thus becomes vulnerable in the physical sense; however, she also protects herself from the social constructs that come with being a woman. If she is revealed to be a woman, Mary may face punishment by stoning, or even jail time. Nevertheless, as a young boy she is able to take advantage of certain privileges that would not be available to her as a woman. Louise A. Jackson, in her essay entitled "The Unusual Case of 'Mrs Sherlock'" recounting the life of real-life female detective Annette Kerner, also includes commentary regarding the implications and advantages of disguise for women. Jackson comments, "For the woman detective, disguise allowed for experimentation with a hybridity or fluidity of social identities. It enabled the well-heeled young woman to escape the male gaze" (122). Jackson's ideology supports the notion that a disguise like Mary's "Amir" would allow her to evade the social constructs that plague women. Mary would likely be unable to obtain this sense of autonomy any other way, thus making this tactic very valuable to her as a detective and as a woman.

The vulnerability Mary faces as a woman is made clear in her evolving relationship with Ali and Mahmoud when she is in disguise. Even though Mary is Amir to the outside world, Ali and Mahmoud know her true identity as

a female rather than a male, and they don't let her forget it. They still treat Mary as a submissive figure because they know she is a woman. After Holmes finishes describing Mary's daring rescue of Jessica Simpson that occurred in the first novel, *The Beekeeper's Apprentice*, Ali is stunned by the story. He asks incredulously, "'You climbed up a tree, entered the house of an enemy, and rescued this child of the American senator? Alone? A woman – a *girl*?'" (King 107). Despite many occurrences that should have proven Mary's capabilities throughout the novel thus far, Ali still does not believe in her skills because of her gender. If Mary were actually Amir, a young boy, he likely would not have been surprised to hear this story. Ali also diminishes her status even more by correcting his label of her gender from "woman" to "girl." "Woman" indicates a more mature female, one more capable, whereas "girl" seems to signal innocence and naiveté. Regardless of the evidence that should convince Ali of Mary's strength, he keeps her confined to the constructs of girlhood, a vulnerable position to be in. She is put in this box, so to speak, by a grown man, emphasizing the difference in authority between Ali as an older male and Mary as a younger female. In sum, the disguise Mary adopts illuminates the debilitating social norms from which she seeks to escape and to which she is ironically subjected despite her masking.

Perhaps the vulnerability that Mary possesses as a girl is one reason why she eventually grows to want to dress as Amir. After Mary attends a party as an overtly feminine character – herself as Miss Mary Russell – she reveals, "It was a good thing that I was not staying here long, definitely not as Miss Russell: being the object of adoring gazes of young men in uniform was clearly a heady thing. Time to crawl back into my robe, turban, and

abayya” (King 298). It seems that acting the part of a very feminine woman takes a toll on Mary’s mental state, one that can be lessened by reverting back to her persona as Amir. If Mary feels more comfortable as a male rather than a female, then maybe this is a testament to the non-normative quality of her character. This disguise in particular, the sexually appealing woman, underscores this quality. The ease with which Mary goes back to Amir is an interesting phenomenon that can allow the reader to make any number of assumptions about her character, perhaps involving something that Mary is even hiding from herself.

Mary’s ability to quickly assume identities and roles other than her own, sometimes at a moment’s notice, can be very telling of her character. Although Mary plays the role of Amir throughout most of the novel, there are a few other instances that require her feminine wiles. When Holmes is kidnapped and held captive, Ali, Mahmoud, and Mary must come to his aid. As they reach the door to the building in which Holmes is held, they realize there is a guard on duty. Mahmoud immediately commands Mary to take off her male clothing and distract the guard while they prepare to knock him out. Even though Mary claims that “one thing [her] training with Holmes had not included [is] the art of seduction,” she crouches against the wall and prepares to use her femininity to their advantage (King 190). She easily slips into a seductive, feminine role. A depiction of the sexually-enthralling woman such as this one can have an almost predatory quality; the *femme fatale* is a persona that draws in men using her overtly sexual qualities and uses them to her advantage. The character that Mary evokes in this instance is not just seductive, however, as she also twists the female stereotype of being emotional to give her the upper hand. Amidst her conversation with the guard, Mary lets the reader know, “my voice choked, and then to

my distress I felt my eyes actually well up and a tear-drop break free and run down my face” (King 191). Mary is surprised at the real emotion that escapes her during this moment; perhaps this persona of the helpless girl helps her to realize just how distraught she is over Holmes’s capture. At this point in the series, Mary and Holmes have not admitted their romantic feelings to one another, so this could be a sign that she cares more deeply for him than she originally thought. Mary is also able to switch into this character fairly quickly, at a moment’s notice. Once again, this demonstrates just how non-normative Mary is; she can spend the majority of the novel as a convincing young boy, but can revert back to a “feminine” character in a matter of minutes. Not many people could plausibly pose as both genders and get away with it. Mary is able to do that, and more.

Mary’s feminine side, stereotypically her more vulnerable side, is once again utilized in order to advance the case at hand. In contrast to the helpless persona she embodies in order to rescue Holmes in a kind of reverse “damsel-in-distress” maneuver, Mary later assumes the role of high-class seductress at a sophisticated party. Although she has more than mere moments to prepare for the character, Mary dives in wholeheartedly; she begins to get into character when a young officer asks to refill her drink and Mary replies, “‘I’d adore another refreshment,’ I purred at him, and watched his pink face turn pinker and his moustache positively bristle with pleasure... If Holmes wanted a nineteen-year-old not-quite-a-lady, that is exactly what he would get” (King 286). This role that Mary assumes is one very much unlike herself, yet she bears the same name. Perhaps by assigning her the same name, King is attempting to hint at the fact that Mary’s seductive role is more a part of her true self than she thinks. It can also be

argued that King is making the point that, at times, one can hide more efficiently while being conspicuous. By attending the party as “Mary Russell,” she can hide in plain sight, acting out a role that bears her name but differs from her day-to-day personality. In the role of a seductive woman, she may be underestimated and dismissed. Thus, Mary can take advantage of the dismissal and obtain the necessary information without detection. Nevertheless, Mary finds that utilizing the idea of the woman’s power – the power to tap into one’s feminine qualities to manipulate others – can be dangerous. It can give a woman the impression that she has more power than she actually does, leaving her vulnerable in a different way: to advances by men, both physical and verbal. The effect of men’s attention clearly influences Mary; as previously mentioned, she calls the act of flirting and being the focus of so many men “a heady thing” (King 298). Being the center of attention as a woman can be an almost intoxicating thing, and Mary may have gotten swept up in it if it wasn’t for the other parts of her consciousness, telling her to slow down. This intoxicating effect leaves Mary, and women in general, vulnerable to the men that supply the very attention they crave. They also fall prey to the conventional image of giving into the weaknesses associated with that stereotype, like the vanity that Mary so vividly experiences.

This isn’t the first time that Mary has garnered unwanted attention from men because of her disguises. In the previous novel in the series, *A Letter of Mary*, Russell assumes the role of Mary Small in order to get a job with Colonel Edwards – a prime suspect in the case at hand – and gather information from the inside. When crafting her disguise, Russell describes the impression she is aiming for as such: “[y]oung, naive, unprotected, determined, and a bit scared – that was the image I held in front of me as I tried

on white lawn blouses, looked at embroidered collars, and studied the effects of different sleeves” (King 120). In this case, Mary actually takes advantage of the vulnerability that comes with being overtly feminine, the woman’s power. She wants the Colonel to fall for her clever disguise and take her outward vulnerability as a sign of weakness. This invitation works, of course, and she gets a job as his secretary – a properly feminine job during this time period. Mary is introduced to Colonel Edward’s son, Gerald, who also falls for Russell’s innocent and unprotected disguise as Mary Small. Her vulnerability is demonstrated when Gerald tries to take advantage of her, kissing her suddenly. Mary immediately reacts violently and tells the reader, “I reacted in part because I was so immersed in the role of Miss Small, and even in 1923, few women would fail to react strongly to such an affront... The real danger was not to me and any honour I might possess, but to my role” (King 157). This shows Mary’s dedication to the character she has developed for herself to embody, as well as the identity confusion that comes as a result of this immersive experience. Russell is not concerned with her own vulnerability, but rather with Mary Small’s. She also openly admits to reacting as Miss Small, not herself; she has been living as this character for so long that she begins to truly embody this other identity.

Mary is not a character, we learn as she evolves in the series, to embrace vulnerability, especially when it involves confronting emotions. Mary frequently chooses to detach from others while working on her studies; arguably, she is avoiding her vulnerabilities by immersing herself in the role of scholar. She is not wearing a literal mask but is perhaps hiding from something. In reality, she may ironically be making herself vulnerable through the detachment that is intended to protect her. In *A Monstrous*

Regiment of Women, Margery Childe is perhaps the first character to tell Mary the truth about her priorities. She says to Mary, ““You need the warmth, Mary – you, Mary, need it. You fear it, you flirt with it, you imagine that you can stand in its rays and retain your cold intellectual attitude towards it. You imagine that you can love with your brain... [Love] only brings life. Please, Mary, don’t let yourself be tied up by the bonds of cold academia”” (King 169-170). Margery directly, if a bit angrily, tells Mary her opinion of her intellectual side. It may seem as if Margery is discouraging Mary’s intellect, but she may actually be encouraging her to know God’s love and, as a result, love in general. Mary is and has always been a non-normative character, a non-normative woman. Her level of intellect is rare, and it should be cultivated, but it shouldn’t prevent Mary from experiencing love. Perhaps Margery is attempting to draw Mary over to the more “irrational” side of womanhood, which is not necessarily a negative side. However, the irrational and emotional side is the more vulnerable side; Mary would need to be vulnerable to the power of love if she leaned into the side that Margery encourages. It is ironic that in Mary’s effort to escape her vulnerability and focus on her schoolwork, she has instead made herself vulnerable in opening herself up to criticism. This criticism, or strong opinion, forces Mary to think more about herself and her emotions, the very things she wanted to avoid in the first place.

Mary’s plan to evade her emotions and bypass vulnerability continues to fail despite her forced confrontation with her feelings. Holmes, ever the detective, begins to discover Mary’s detachment during their marriage. Mary was able to give in to vulnerability and develop a mature, nonprofessional relationship with Holmes that resulted in their marriage, but retreats back to

her world of academia in *A Letter of Mary*. Holmes coldly tells Mary, ““Russell, if you were occasionally to raise your sight from your Hebrew verbs doubly weak and irregular and your iota subscripts, you might take more notice of the world around you. Your preoccupation with your studies could kill you”” (King 55). In this instance, Mary’s attempt to detach leaves her vulnerable not only to criticism, but also to physical harm. Her lack of attention to the present case and her preoccupation with her studies could prove dangerous to everyone involved, including herself. It is interesting that Holmes, like Margery, is trying to wean Mary off of her intellectual addictions, but he is not trying to also bring her to irrationality. Holmes is a rational man who still wants Mary to conduct herself rationally, but conduct herself rationally on a case, as a detective.

Mary’s internal debate with her studies raises this question: are you more free if you make yourself invulnerable, or if you instead choose to accept vulnerability? Mary seems to think that invulnerability is the answer. She continues this thought process even after the events that take place in *O Jerusalem*; in the eighth story of the series, *Locked Rooms*, Mary struggles to confront her past and accept the possibility that her family may have been murdered. This case, a very personal one, causes her to internalize many powerful emotions and thoughts, which takes a toll on her mental and physical health. In one scene, when she decides to go out dancing with her childhood friend Flo, she reminisces on the concept of youth. Mary describes the Charleston as “a dance of unbridled energy, making it impossible to feel anything but strong and filled with the invulnerability of youth. It was breathless and pointless and fun” (King 259). When you are in your youth, you often feel invincible, like nothing can hurt you. There is no opportunity for

vulnerability, because you are young and have so much to live for. Here, Mary wistfully recalls that feeling, one she doesn't seem to experience very often. It implies an innocence that Mary no longer possesses, not after everything she has been through in life. She seems to be conflicted; she may want to experience invulnerability once again, and she can for a night, but the reality is that she can't afford to think in this manner. Mary needs to be vulnerable in order to grow as a character and to grow into her true identity.

As a prominent female detective, Mary Russell is forced to be malleable; she must embody any number of disguises and assume any identity for any type of case. These disguises serve as protection, as Russell typically attempts to avoid detection by becoming a different person. However, at times these facades fail to protect, leaving Mary vulnerable in different ways. As Amir, Mary is subject to physical as well as verbal harm; Ali and Mahmoud know her true identity and still use gendered constructs against her and her abilities. Over the course of her adventures in *O Jerusalem*, Mary must be able to shed her identity as a young boy and revert back to her feminine ways. This is done easily. Such facility indicates that Mary's character may be more similar to the disguises than she knows, causing a point of confusion concerning her identity. Playing the part of the seductive, feminine woman, Mary seems to gain the upper hand over men in a patriarchal society, but she is left open and vulnerable to male advances. Mary is typically not fully aware of her own emotions, as evidenced by the newly found self-discoveries she makes while in disguise, as she chooses to detach herself from the outside world and focus on her academic studies. Both Margery Childe and Holmes are unafraid to speak up against this behavior; they are

concerned with knowledge, and the fear that Mary is missing out on knowledge and experiences because she is focusing on her studies. Each conversation prompts Mary to reconsider her priorities and face the vulnerability she fears. Mary's struggle to grapple with her identity is a manifestation and a prime example of the broader identity crises that women faced during the early 20th century. Using Mary as a specific illustration of this crisis, one that was first brought to light in the first two novels of King's series, allows the reader to gain more insight into the social conditions that existed for women at this point in history. The vulnerability and question of identity control Mary in various capacities, but in the end, it provides an opportunity to catch a glimpse of her complex character, her true identity, and the ways in which gender plays a larger role in King's series.

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