

ARTS & LETTERS

*The Case of
Sherlock Holmes*

"Sherlock Holmes, Order, and the Late-Victorian Mind" by Christopher Clausen, in *The Georgia Review* (Spring 1984), University of Georgia, Athens, Ga. 30602.

Sherlock Holmes surely would have enjoyed unraveling the mysteries of his own existence.

Starting with *A Study in Scarlet*, in 1887, author Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930) made a career for his famous character that spanned three other novels and 56 short stories over 40 years. The Holmes canon covers so much ground, writes Clausen, who teaches at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute, that it offers an "unrivaled and largely overlooked" record of evolving British social attitudes.

Holmes exemplifies the Victorian faith in scientific reason. "I am a brain, Watson," he announces to his faithful companion in "The Mazarin Stone," "The rest of me is a mere appendix." Indeed, writes Clausen, Holmes is "the sort of isolated intellectual who today would be called alienated: introverted, frighteningly analytical, and often cynical." When he is not wrapped up in a case, Holmes indulges in cocaine and morphine to combat his ennui.

Holmes's single-minded devotion to "the science of deduction" allows him to "serve as the guardian of a threatened society that his author means him to be." To the affluent classes of late-Victorian England, the specter of social upheaval loomed most immediately in violent crime. "The butler did it" was no joke to them, says Clausen, it was "a revealing fear."

"When all else has failed—and the police almost always fail in the Holmes stories—the isolated, disclassed genius is the one who saves the day." Holmes's cases reflect the paranoia of well-to-do Victorians: blackmail, illicit attempts to claim inheritances, labor union terrorism. And the Baker Street sleuth's clients are far from ordinary: They include Queen Victoria, a pope, and several prime ministers.

World War I brought an end to such Victorian preoccupations. Domestic crimes paled beside the horrors of war. Britain's real enemies were across the Channel; the Victorian faith in the ability of cool reason to triumph in human affairs lay in ruins.

Even Doyle sensed that Holmes was outmoded: The post-1914 tales are inferior, Clausen believes. Other authors created a new crop of sleuths, but none would take crime quite as seriously as the master did.

Opera's Fate

"Opera 1984: Dead or Alive?" by Samuel Lipman, in *The New Criterion* (Mar. 1984), 850 Seventh Ave., New York, N.Y. 10019.

Operas today are being staged more often, and are attracting larger audiences, than ever before. Yet Lipman, publisher of the *New Criterion*, detects signs of decay amid all the vigor.

"At a time when there is new literature, new poetry, new visual art, new dance, and even (most wanly received, it is true) new music," he

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complains, "there just isn't much new opera to be seen." Among the 87 opera companies that make up OPERA America, opera's equivalent of a national trade association, the most frequently performed work during the 1981-82 season was Giuseppe Verdi's *Rigoletto*, written in 1851. Of the 47 operas that were performed at least 10 times during the season, only 13 were creations of the 20th century (and six of those were Puccini operas from the early 1900s).

A look at the 1983-84 production schedule of the OPERA America companies suggests that the situation is getting worse. Out of 263 planned presentations, 222 were written before 1930.

The companies reply that because of cuts in subsidies from the U.S. National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), they cannot afford to take chances on modern works that might not draw large audiences. Lipman is skeptical: The NEA's grants to opera companies totaled only \$2 million in 1975, peaked at over \$6 million in 1981, and fell only to \$5 million in 1983.

But the NEA is responsible in another way for at least some of opera's ossification, he argues. In 1978, it lumped together its subsidies for opera and for more popularly oriented musical theater. Ever since, opera companies have had to contend with "arts bureaucrats" who often prefer lighter musicals. Lipman insists, however, that the opera companies themselves are most at fault. He says that it is the responsibility of the top companies, such as New York's Metropolitan Opera, to present new works regardless of how many people turn out to hear them.

The classic operas of Mozart, Verdi, and others are "treasures of civilization" and must be performed. But if newer works—e.g., Dominick Argento's *Miss Havisham's Fire*, Roger Sessions's *Montezuma*—are not staged more often, opera itself could face eventual extinction.

OTHER NATIONS

Does Europe Still Exist?

"The Tragedy of Central Europe" by Milan Kundera, in *The New York Review of Books* (Apr. 26, 1984), P.O. Box 940, Farmingdale, N.Y. 11737.

In November 1956, as Soviet troops moved in to suppress a rebellion in Budapest, the director of the Hungarian News Agency telexed a last message to the outside world: "We are going to die for Hungary and for Europe."

Sadly, most of those for whom his message was intended could not quite comprehend it, writes Czechoslovakian-born novelist Milan Kundera. To Western Europeans, Hungary and the other nations of Central Europe—Poland, Czechoslovakia, Rumania—had become part of the Soviet bloc after 1945. They had already "vanished from the map of the West." How could Hungarians choose to die for something to which they no longer belonged?