

Conan Doyle, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*

*Suggestions for commentary*

Arriving at Sir Henry's hotel, Holmes examines the register. Tricking the clerk into thinking he knows the two names added since Sir Henry, he gleans information that excludes the two from suspicion. So, the detective concludes, the watcher has not settled in Henry's hotel, and as such, wants very much to see but not to be seen. Heading upstairs, the pair runs into Sir Henry, enraged at the theft of a second boot, this time an old one. Sir Henry denounces the hotel staff but is also surprised at Sherlock Holmes' suggestion that the thefts may have something to do with the case.

A number of elements point to Sir Henry Baskerville's exasperation. His face is thus described as "flushed with anger". The narrator then adds that the character is so furious "that he was hardly articulate". Language becomes a symptom. Utterance becomes difficult and his local accent is more audible than ever. On the surface, the scene has a comic dimension—it is all the more comic as what is happening here is largely the repetition of a previous incident. Repetition is an essential comedic device. Repetition overdone or not going anywhere belongs to comedy, for laughter is partly a mechanical reflex, and like other reflexes, it can be conditioned by a simple reaped pattern. Bergson, in *Le Rire*, defined comedy as "du mécanique plaqué sur du vivant", as a mechanical overlay upon the fluidity and continuity of life, as something jerky, discontinuous, and maladjusted being substituted for the perfect mobility and grace of what he called "élan vital". The "missing boot" is thus to be construed as a *structural* element in the creation of comedy. The character of Sir Henry undergoes a discreet but essential alteration here. Sir Henry, who is earlier on in the novel described as "a small, alert, dark-eyed man about thirty years of age, very sturdily built", begins to lose his solid appearance (remember that by the end of the story, Sir Henry is as worn out and shell-shocked as his late uncle was before his death) and his faulty idiom indicates that something is taking place within himself. The character is significantly described as wildly gesticulating and unable to express himself save through coarse and rather common language ("they are playing me for a suckler"; "they have started in to monkey with the wrong man" ; "by thunder"), which somehow turns him into a Falstaff-like, bragging figure ready to fight for a boot.

The boot becomes a central issue in this passage. It is almost a character *per se*, but *in absentia*. In many respects, it must be considered as something more important than a mere boot. Of course it is what triggers off Sir Henry's anger—and it can be read as some sort of comic relief in the unfolding of the mystery. But it is also a mystery in

itself. It can even be interpreted as a metonymy of the whole mystery. It is fundamentally “what is missing”. The boot is central because it is *absent*, whereas it should *not* be. It is absent and such an absence cannot be rationally explained. And this aspect is perhaps more important than the comic vein (or thread). It is to be taken seriously.

Boots do not usually disappear (and reappear) as easily as that. Why should someone want and take a single boot rather than a pair? And why first take a new boot and then return to steal an old one? In theory a new boot would be preferred to an old one and a pair of matching boots would be much more useful and valuable than a single boot. In other words all this does not make sense and defies reason. Yet the missing boot is not “a trifle”—as Sir Henry puts it—but something “well worth troubling about”—as Holmes suspects. Because the missing-boot episode is “the very maddest, queerest thing that has ever happened to [Sir Henry]”, it must therefore be taken *seriously*. Note that Holmes repeats the word “queerest”, as used by Sir Henry, to affix it to the term “perhaps”. It must be emphasized that Holmes does not question the *queer* nature of the event but only its superlative quality, as indeed the hound of the Baskervilles — the creature, the monster, etc...—definitely remains at that point the queerest mystery. Sir Henry’s case is thus analyzed as “complex” and is well above “the five hundred cases of capital importance” Holmes previously treated. The “Boot Case” is not to be dismissed as a minor event (indeed it must *not* be booted out) and it is in fact, according to Holmes, one of the threads leading to the truth. Walking is more comfortable when wearing two boots (and we know right from the start how closely connected *walking* and *deducing* are). Or else your gait is imperfect —and you’ll stumble. Following this thread amounts to unravelling the entire mystery. Finding the missing boot in order to reconstitute a pair will help us and walk ahead on the path to truth. The “thread metaphor” used by the detective is of paramount importance as it is one of those many passages in the novel where the *text* consciously refers to itself as a *fabric* or *textile* construction (*cf.* from Latin *textus* “style or texture of a work,” literally “thing woven,” from past participle stem of *texere* “to weave, to join, fit together, braid, interweave, construct, fabricate, build”). Boots are threads enabling the plot to be woven. The boot—just like the walking stick at the beginning of the novel— is what makes the reader walk on (and read on).