

“Characteristics of the Hands”: Gender, Race, and Palmistry in *The Sign of Four*

Jon Heggstad

English Department

University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

Centennial Hall 4102, 1698 Park Avenue

Eau Claire, WI 54701, USA

Email: heggesjb@uwec.edu

Abstract:

Images of hands bookend Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Sign of Four*, but hands are more than a framing device in the text. Through a close reading of these hands and their connection to the popular nineteenth-century science of palmistry, this article illustrates how deeply embedded misogynist and colonial stereotypes are in this canonical work. Dr. John Watson’s hands figure as strong and masculine emblems of the British Empire, for instance, frequently depicted as taking hold and taking care of Mary Morstan’s gloved and modest hands. In the context of an historical palm reading, the cowardly Thaddeus Sholto’s hands are described as effeminate; in reference to their smallness and unrestrained emotionality, the text draws a parallel between Sholto and Tonga, the novel’s diminutive antagonist. A colonial subject, Tonga is so dehumanized in the text that Holmes looks to the baser appendage of his feet, rather than his hands, in deducing his character. In this way, a holistic view of the hands allows readers to analyze what Anne McClintock has called layers of hierarchy.

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The Sign of Four both opens and closes on the image of Sherlock Holmes’s “long white hand” (Doyle 2010, 49). And like the descendants of Thing Addams, hands run rampant throughout the novel. They are consistently referred to in order to display action, emotion, and hidden meanings. The most prevalent and overt instance appears early in the novel, as Holmes reviews his study on hands for Dr. Watson’s benefit:

Here, too, is a curious little work upon the influence of a trade upon the form of the hand, with lithotypes of the hands of slaters, sailors, corkcutters, compositors, weavers, and diamond-polishers. That is a matter of great practical interest to the scientific detective,—especially in cases of unclaimed bodies, or in discovering the antecedents of criminals. (Doyle 2010, 53)

Depicting the hand as capable of not only indicating an individual’s habits, but of predicting his

trade, Holmes identifies this appendage as a perfect subject for both observation and deduction—those nuanced powers that he insists are necessary in any worthwhile detective (Doyle 52).

Through Watson's narration, the novel further reveals what depths of meaning are contained in the figure of the hand, a preoccupation that feels perfectly attuned to the larger cultural interest in palmistry throughout the nineteenth century. Although a "diverting drawing room entertainment" for some, the insights afforded through palmistry were nevertheless esteemed by other Victorians, believed to offer a glimpse at an individual's inner nature (Matthews 2017). The science of palmistry, as Charles S. F. Burnett, defined it, refers to "[t]he practice of reading the future, or divining the character and disposition of a person from the lines and other indications in the palm of the hand" (Burnett 1987, 189). Victorians had many names for this practice—also referring to palmistry by the related terms *chiromancy*, *chirosofhy*, and *chirognomy*.¹ According to Langdon Taylor's 1806 publication, *A Handy Guide to Palmistry*, these latter terms carried slightly varying connotations; while palmistry and chiromancy might be used interchangeably, "deal[ing] with the palm of the hand," "[c]hirognomy concerns the form and character of the hand as a whole" (Taylor 1806, 7). Chirosofhy, Taylor writes, refers to the science as a whole. Although the *OED* dates these terms as far back as the fifteenth and sixteenth century, the frequency of their use saw a sharp rise in popularity during the latter half of the nineteenth century, specifically (Windscheffel 2006, 7).

The Sign of Four was published in 1890, at the height of what Victorian scholar Joan Navarre identifies as the "palmistry craze" (2011, 174). While this craze is evidenced throughout a number of Victorian publications on the subject, *Lippincott's Magazine of Literature, Science and Education* (the magazine in which Doyle's *The Sign of Four* was first published) serves as a useful case study in its own right. Oscar Wilde's "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime," for example, centers around a chiromantist's ominous palm reading and first appeared in *Lippincott's* in 1887. Alongside Wilde's story ran an essay by the prominent palmist Edward Heron-Allen titled "The Chiromancy of To-Day: The Evolution of an Occult Science" (Lorang 2010, 22).

The subtitle of Heron-Allen's essay highlights part of the Victorians' fascination with this practice, i.e., studying the form of the hand offered yet another way of scientifically classifying different categories of people. Viewed in this light, palmistry takes on a taxonomic objective (adhering to a Linnaean system of ordering hierarchies) that might easily be identified alongside other evolutionary branches of pseudosciences like phrenology and physiognomy that peaked in popularity during the nineteenth century as well. In *The Racial Hand in the Victorian Imagination*, Aviva Briefel even suggests that the emerging practice of fingerprinting might be linked to the Victorians' interest in palmistry (Briefel 2017, 5). Approaching this preoccupation with hands from a wider context, Peter J. Capuano writes that "major changes unique to the nineteenth century made hands newly relevant, and . . . this new relevance reconfigured the hand's relationship to the body in ways that shaped just about every encounter of the Victorian novel. And these ways continue to influence how we live in the world today" (Capuano 2015, 1). In so saying, Capuano hints at the lasting cultural impact of this Victorian practice.

However, there is—of course—a reason that palmistry is regarded as a *pseudoscience* and not as a proper branch of scientific study. Rosa Baughan, the author of *The Handbook of Palmistry*, even goes so far as to say, “We do not pretend to any absolute belief in this science, [...] but, having taken up the study from mere curiosity, we found it interesting” (Baughan 1885, 10). And yet, a “science” Baughan calls it, nonetheless.² Still, hints of skepticism appear in Heron-Allen’s writing as well, despite his notably more earnest approach to the field. As Elizabeth Lorang points out in the title of Heron Allen’s essay, “science” is paired with the “occult,” and shifts the conversation to one more easily deemed science fiction than science proper. But whereas Lorang observes that palmistry’s widespread appeal might create “a counter-history to empiricism and positivism,” I argue that the Victorian practice of palmistry more poignantly continued to reproduce empiricist narratives through methods steeped in misogyny and racism (Lorang 2010, 22). While palmistry attests to an ideology that was regarded as both scientific and spiritual, this article illustrates how both narratives (science and the occult) work symbiotically to undermine effeminate and colonized subjects—often by conflating the two. While projecting a hierarchical and evolutionary mode of thinking, palmistry thus also embraced Adorno’s notion of the occult as “a source of authority,” able to articulate and impose a narrative that appeared, at once, both rational and authoritative (Kumar 2012).

In order to better understand the way palmistry constructed this authoritative narrative, it is useful to more closely examine the practice itself. According to Peter Hazel, a contemporary palmist, many of the occult science’s tenets have remained unchanged since the Victorian era. Tracing the lineage of this practice, Hazel states that even Victorian chiromancy was simply “robust medieval palmistry” with “a good, hearty tweak”—Victorians overlaying “basic principles” with their own empiricist worldview (Hazel 2015, ix-x). While Hazel states that this led to readings that could be “extremely sexist and racist and rather disapproving in tone,” he expands on neither how these changes occurred nor how palmistry made them tangible (x). In addressing these historical questions, Sherlock Holmes’s deductive reasoning skills allow readers a clearer portrayal of palmistry’s function in the lives of the Victorians. Although Holmes does not make direct reference to the field of palmistry in *The Sign of Four*, the text’s emphasis on the figure of the hand, its import, and the ways it “speaks” to characters’ inner traits are informed by an understanding of this Victorian practice, providing contemporary readers a rich case study of the values once embedded into the fingers, mounds, and shape of the hand. Indeed, Doyle’s novel heavily reaffirms and relies upon the gendered constructs of palmistry before then extending and linking these constructs to both race and sexuality.

The Gendered Hand

The Victorian palmist Heron-Allen identifies many characteristics of the hand that might be linked to effeminacy, and these traits are always perceived as negative. A complete lack of hair, extreme paleness, softness and a prominent Mount of Venus (the pad of the palm where the thumb branches off, which is generally thought to be indicative of the subject’s romantic temperament,

emotion and sensitivity³) all "betray effeminacy" (Heron-Allen 1885, 116). The implication is clear; effeminacy is something one must unwillingly "give up or expose" (*OED*). This implicit ideology tied to Victorian palmistry makes a similar, earlier appearance in Taylor's previously mentioned *A Handy Guide to Palmistry*. In the introduction to this work, Taylor writes, "A weak, effeminate hand shows a weak, effeminate nature" (Taylor 1806, 8). In this construction, "weak" and "effeminate" are intrinsically linked. There is no reference, for instance, to what a weak, manly hand might indicate.

While a small hand may indicate a "more *spirituel* disposition," it indicates none of the "force and power" which a larger (more masculine) hand possesses (Heron-Allen 1806, 28). In addition to being larger in size, a masculine hand is hard in consistency and rosy in complexion—indicative of its general utility and robustness (115-121). Although there is some biological backing for this claim pertaining to the differing average hand sizes of men and women,⁴ this claim is often (still) exaggerated, and the correlations between hand size and inner traits put forth by Victorian palmistry have never been properly evidenced (and, most likely, never will be).⁵

This narrative is made abundantly clear in *The Sign of Four*. Men's hands are depicted as moving and working—as tools of industry (generally) and as instruments for observation and deduction (in the case of Holmes and Watson). The detective's hands, for example, are used both to display feats of athleticism (Doyle 2010, 84) as well as to investigate clues (85-86). Women's hands, however, are portrayed as inactive and fairly incapable of being put to any real use. And yet, each woman that Holmes and Watson encounter in the novel is immediately accompanied with a description of her hands—of how they look and what they are doing.

In addition to using his hands for manly detective work, Watson also mentions several instances in which his hands are symbols of strength and protection, offering to defend and comfort Mary Morstan. Mary's hands, which quiver and betray all of her femininity, at least have the decency to hide their effeminate outbursts of emotion. When she is first introduced at the novel's start, she is said to be "well gloved" (Doyle 2010, 57). As the only woman whose gloves are mentioned, many readings might fit alongside this depiction: perhaps Mary herself is a mystery; perhaps she is being represented as a Lockean *tabula rasa*; or perhaps the gloves are merely an indicator of her modesty. If the gloves are meant to conceal what Heron-Allen deems the emotionality of feminine hands, however, they fail in this endeavor. On the same page that her gloves are mentioned, Mary's hands begin to quiver—a sign which Watson quickly reads, identifying that it "show[s] every sign of intense inward agitation" (57). Seeing this, Watson rises to leave, allowing Mary to more privately discuss her case with Holmes (whose own hands are being rubbed together in anticipation of the mystery he expects to hear). Yet, Mary's hands further betray her. "[T]he young lady held up her gloved hand to detain me," records Watson, and he—seeing in this gesture not only her desire for his presence, but perhaps a foreshadowing of the romance to come—remains (57).

Yet Mary's emotion is expressed most visibly in a later scene, in which "[s]he put her hand to her throat, and a choking sob cut[s] short" her speech (Doyle 2010, 58). As a very different type

of hand-to-the-throat than the one Jonathan Small later says he would have liked to have around Major Sholto's neck, Mary performs a gesture that has somehow become synonymous with femininity—a gesture that Academy-Award-winning actor Eddie Redmayne relied upon heavily, for instance, to portray his character's inner (female) identity in *The Danish Girl* (2015). Sociologist Michael Kimmel has extended an analysis of this trope, noting that the pervasive understanding of certain hand gestures as feminine has not only been relied upon in order to *portray* inner gender identity, but to *expose* it as well. Kimmel points to contemporary childhood games (or what Kimmel calls “tricks”) in which boys are coerced into performing such seemingly arbitrary tasks as looking at their own fingernails. “[I]f he held the back of his hand away from his face, and looked at his fingernails with arm outstretched, he was immediately ridiculed as a sissy,” the sociologist recounts (Kimmel 2009, 65). In this way, a simple gesture is made to function as a test capable of “unmasking” effeminacy. This formula, this trick that Kimmel describes, still exists in various forms today, and—as seen in the passages above—has an early predecessor in the palmistry-infused deductions recorded in *The Sign of Four*.

The Racialized Hand

As seen in the classification of the gendered hands above, Victorians were quick to find ways for using palmistry as yet another method for inscribing order on the world. While gender was easily taken into account, classifying race through the characteristics of the hand presented more significant obstacles. Briefel states that the nineteenth century saw a constant demand for “a brand of palmistry that would illuminate the question of race,” but connections were few and far between (Briefel 2017, 17). Briefel references an article in the *Saturday Review*, which concluded that “it must be admitted that men of much higher claims to respect than professors of palmistry have shown almost equal incapacity for scientific descriptions of different types of race” (Briefel 2017, 17). Yet, claims like this one certainly did not stop palmists from *trying* to imbue the hand with racial meaning anyway.

Indeed, if Heron-Allen was aware of the statement put forth by the *Saturday Review* just two decades before the publication of his essay “Cheiromancy of To-Day,” he must have regarded it as a personal challenge. “[L]et us first settle the great question of the racial hand,” he writes in *A Manual of Cheirosophy* before setting out on that very task:

[W]e shall see, as we get further into the subject of Cheirognomy, how certain shapes of hands predominate among the English, the Germans, and the French; and again we shall notice the widely differing characteristics of the hands of meridional and septentrional, of oriental and occidental nations. Again, we shall see how different characters and mental calibres admire different shapes of hands, according to the characteristics which those shapes represent in Cheirognomy. (Heron-Allen 1885, 27)

In the passage above, Heron-Allen claims that palmistry not only offers the means of classifying the racial hand, but also that the results of this study will attest to the “mental calibres”

of its subjects. While he fails to expound on these claims, a worldview of Victorian imperialism is nevertheless projected upon the racialized hand. The resulting narrative, therefore, is emblematic of what Briefel describes as the unique blending of literary, cultural and scientific discourses that palmistry maps out (Briefel 2017, 22).

Although Briefel only makes slight references to Doyle's work, *The Sign of Four* functions as a complex case study of this phenomenon, primarily through the hands of Tonga (Small's companion from the Andaman Islands, just off the east coast of India). Tonga represents a Victorian desire for the ranking of racialized hands in two primary ways: through the replacement and the restriction of these instruments. Thus, while gender is evident in what *is* communicated about hand forms and hand gestures, racial qualities result from a more asymptomatic reading—i.e., Holmes relies on what is *not* present in order to piece together his knowledge of Tonga.

Before delving into this interpretation, however, it is worth noting that the most characteristic trait regarding Tonga's hands is their extreme smallness. While his hands are, generally, in proportion to the rest of his slight frame, the emphasis on the smallness of individual body parts instead of on the whole functions synecdochally, depicting Tonga *not* in relation to an entire (human) body, but rather through a colonial gaze that isolates fragments of the character in disembodied glimpses. Holmes illustrates this as he relays information regarding Tonga's people to an attentive Watson. Quoting from a volume he deems "the very latest authority" on the inhabitants of the Andaman Islands, Holmes states that its natives boast "the distinction of being the smallest race upon this earth" (Doyle 2010, 109). Elaborating on this claim, the volume (and Holmes) look to individual body parts: "small, fierce eyes," "feet and hands [that] are remarkably small" (109). And yet, in juxtaposing these more diminutive features with "large, misshapen heads" these Western authorities conclude that the inhabitants are "naturally hideous" (109). Rhetorically, this reference to the size of Tonga's head works toward comparative purposes. How would the reader be able to understand the strangeness of Tonga's small features unless they were clearly offset? And so it is that the focus remains on this character's individual parts, dehumanizing the person to whom these appendages are connected. For example, surprised at the footprints Tonga leaves—mere traces of a fragmented body—Watson mistakenly concludes that they came from either a child or a small woman (Doyle 2010, 93). As small hands have already been identified (by Heron-Allen) as indicative of effeminacy—a decidedly negative trait according to the chiromancy manuals—Watson's statement extends this notion to Tonga and (through Tonga) to his race at large.

While Holmes's "authority" might be used to deduce the smallness of Tonga's hands, such a conclusion is, indeed, the result of the detective's esteemed art of deduction and not to any observation within the actual text, as Tonga's hands hardly make any appearance in the narrative at all. The focus of the passage mentioned above, for example, is not Tonga's hands, but his feet. In viewing Tonga in light of his feet rather than his hands, the novel replaces those divine qualities which the hand represents with those of a baser appendage. In addition, Tonga's feet are almost immediately marked as black, racially Othered, after Holmes discovers that Tonga has stepped in

creosote: “You can see the outline of the edge of his small foot here at the side of this evil-smelling mess” (Doyle 2010, 86). Here, Holmes draws attention to Tonga’s small foot by noting the black impression that it has left. This characterization of Tonga by his feet comes across as a deliberate choice on the part of Holmes as it contrasts with the detective’s focus on the hands of all other (white) characters in the text. For instance, Holmes is able to track Small—the novel’s other villain—through “a good deal of skin missing from the palm of his hand” (89). Although Holmes here is once more shown to enact a form of asymptomatic reading, he nevertheless offers a more even-handed analysis to Jonathan Small.

When Holmes does finally acknowledge Tonga’s hands, it is in instructing Watson to “[f]ire if he raises his hand” (Doyle 2010, 125). Whereas the racialized hand is replaced with other appendages earlier in the novel, Tonga’s agency is here denied through the restriction placed on him. Men’s hands have been identified as symbols of power, but this characteristic is denied to Tonga, who is racialized Other. When he resists Holmes’s dictate, bringing his blow-pipe to his lips, Watson and Holmes fire their revolvers, killing the Andaman native. In what seems a poignant, final display of resistance, Tonga is last seen with his arms thrown up over his head as he falls sideways into the Thames (125).

In analyzing these limitations, it might be noted that Small is somewhat conflated with his companion. Small’s name, for example, also happens to be the most distinctive quality attributed to Tonga. Furthermore, Small is partially tracked and identified through his distinct footprints (as one of his legs is wooden) although this appendage never completely substitutes for the qualities of his hands, as is the case for Tonga. Lastly, Small is restrained by handcuffs at the end of the story, but again, this restriction is not as severe as the death that Tonga faces (and which the reader learns was unnecessary as Tonga had run out of darts for his blow-pipe, no longer presenting a threat to Holmes and Watson) (Doyle 2010, 126; 155).

In this intersection of race and criminality, the “layers of hierarchy” which Anne McClintock describes in *Imperial Leather* are revealed. According to McClintock, “race, gender, and class are not distinct realms of experience, existing in splendid isolation from each other,” but that instead can only be experienced “*in and through* relation to each other—if in contradictory and conflictual ways” (McClintock 1995, 5, italics hers). Within *The Sign of Four*, these layers are nowhere so evident as when presented through the hands of Thaddeus Sholto and the merchant Achmet.

The Queer Hand

As with the women in the novel, the first thing Watson describes upon meeting Thaddeus is the movement of his hands: “He writhed his hands together as he stood, and his features were in a perpetual jerk” (Doyle 2010, 67). In a single gesture, Sholto is simultaneously effeminized and made unseemly. Despite his attempts to conceal this ugliness (he is “constantly passing his hand over the lower part of his face”), his hands betray him, instead highlighting the very traits he had hoped they might hide (67).

Throughout the course of the novel, Thaddeus Sholto's hands quiver, rattle, and shake (Doyle 2010, 78). They are thrust before him as he runs in fear and wrung in agony as he moans over his unfortunate state (79; 82). At one point, he is so shaken that he even requires the protective hands of another man to support him (80). Not only do these actions line up with those that palmists might expect of female hands, they also—more generally—point to the emotional outbursts which are unexpected (and disapproved of) in men.

While being likened to a woman in this way, Sholto is also continually read as "little." While this further indicates effeminacy, it also identifies Sholto alongside Tonga in the context of the novel. Ultimately, this works to conflate Othered identities. The point is made even more apparent in likening this effeminate character to the similarly feminized merchant Achmet (whom Small aids in killing). Achmet is the only other male character in the novel whose hand gestures, specifically, are described in entirely effeminate terms; Small recounts that they "quiver[ed] with fear" and "twitched as if he had the ague," likening his nervous and tell-tale gestures to illness, itself (Doyle 2010, 133). In comparing Achmet and Sholto to one another through the characteristics of their hands, they are both relegated to the position of colonized subjects—a connection that is further evidenced by the latter's aesthetic of "Eastern luxury" (67). This connection is concretized through the novel's conflation of effeminate and colonial subjects, which—as Mrinalini Sinha observes in *Colonial Masculinity*—is an association that stretches back to the earliest days of colonial rule (1995, 15).

The Jeweled Hand

Before concluding this essay, I would like to identify one further connection between gender and race through the form of the hand. The treasure is what ultimately drives the narrative of *The Sign of Four*, moving from one set of hands to another. Before the action of the novel even begins, the treasure is strongly colonial, belonging to an Indian Rajah. Jonathan Small steals this, of course, before Major Sholto later steals it from him. In the action at the beginning of the novel, the Major's son (Thaddeus Sholto) is in the process of sharing the treasure with Mary Morstan, but this is interrupted when Small once more steals the treasure back. By the end of the novel, Small has scattered the treasure across the bottom of the Thames. "Where is the justice that I should give it up to those who have never earned it?" Small asks, refusing to see the treasure in the hands of women like Mary Morstan or effeminate men like Achmet and Sholto (Doyle 2010, 133). In posing this question, Small is either ignoring the fact that he initially took the treasure from Indian possession or (just as likely) including them in his list of those he deems undeserving. Although the rajah had entrusted his "his jewels into the hands of Achmet," Small refuses to follow suit (144). Rather than see the treasure once more in any of these Othered hands, Small denies it from all.

In connection to how treasure is viewed *in* the hands of these Othered subjects is the way in which treasure has been viewed *on* these hands. According to Hazel, rings and bracelets are often indicative of negative characteristics in the subjects whom they adorn:

It should be emphasized that these readings of personal choice in jewelry are rather judgmental and negative, reflecting Victorian values. Rings (except for those worn on the third finger of the left hand, i.e., wedding rings) may be considered an indication of difficulties within a person. The wearing of a ring tends to cut off the qualities of the finger on which it is worn. The actual size of the rings may also be significant. Small, unobtrusive rings signify a lesser influence than large, ornate rings. (Hazel 2015, 17-18)

In the case of rings, smallness is an attribute that is finally esteemed. More broadly, however, rings imply deceitfulness or vanity in a person. To better illuminate how Victorians viewed these adornments, we might consult William Jones's *Finger-Ring Lore: Historical, Legendary, Anecdotal*, first published in 1877. In this work, the history that Jones constructs around rings might be seen as merely another attempt to categorize racialized groups of people. In tracing the stories attached to a number of rings, Jones presents historical examples alongside contemporary, colonized subjects. By structuring his work in this way, he imagines an evolutionary trajectory, one in which his British countrymen are the most developed and civilized.

One does not have to look very far in order to discover whom these beliefs about rings benefit and whom they disadvantage. While esteemed nineteenth-century Indian rajas (like the one Jonathan Small robs) often wore abundant amounts of jewelry, British gentlemen were much more restrained in their adornments. Consider Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, for example, photographs of whom only ever display a thin wedding band across a solitary finger. In this way, jewelry might be seen to stand in for the hand synecdochally, with masculinity portrayed through restraint and limitation.

According to Jones, Hazel, and others, the wedding ring was, of course, the one exception to a Victorian palmist's denouncement of jewelry. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the wedding ring was not only an exception, but exceptional. In 1888, for instance, Frank Baker, a professor of anatomy, observed that it simply made sense for the ring finger to carry a ring—attributing to this practice a scientific logic of natural order (Baker 1888, 72).

Within *The Sign of Four*, the wedding ring is an implied treasure. This is depicted most clearly in Mary Morstan's "choice" between independent wealth and the wealth of obtaining a husband—a prerequisite for taking part in an imperial futurity. Upon learning that Miss Morstan may become "the richest heiress in England," Watson fears that he will lose her before he has even fully obtained her (Doyle 2010, 76). In "Tautological Crimes: Why Women Can't Steal Jewels," Briefel suggests that the most threatening thing a Victorian woman could do was to desire owning her own property—as a woman who found herself financially independent from a man no longer had the same drives to create a (reproductive) future with him (2003). This explains why, despite feeling guilty that his response to Mary's favorable change of fortune is one of disappointment, Watson nevertheless dislikes the notion of her becoming independently wealthy. Furthermore, her ultimate loss of these expectations is accompanied by Watson's own delight in what his masculine hands are once more able to do: "[Y]ou are within my reach again," he says, and in taking her hand, he declares that she did not withdraw it (Doyle 2010, 131). In drawing attention to Mary's being "within [his] reach," Watson further emphasizes their relative position to one another through

reference to manual signification—a position that the doctor then proceeds to cement in the act of capturing Mary's hand in his own.

In celebration of their newly declared love, Watson states, "Whoever had lost a treasure, I knew that night that I had gained one" (Doyle 2010, 132). In this declaration, the woman is presented as treasure. While Watson does eventually obtain Mary, he too becomes a treasure for her, replacing the valuable jewels she might have, at first, hoped for.

The treasure Watson offers seems most tangible in the reproductive futurity that his marriage proposal extends. In this way, *The Sign of Four* might be regarded as an example of repronarrative. Michael Warner coined the term *repronarrative* in order to identify a prevalent convention in early American texts; by *repronarrative*, Warner refers to any literary works that revolves around traditional forms of marriage and reproduction (Warner 2000). In a text following this structure, an ending is generally marked by a new beginning (or, at least, the hint of a new beginning through a newly minted union). In *The Sign of Four*, this "natural" conclusion is further reinforced by the gravitational pull between Watson and Mary's hands which, on multiple occasions, find themselves clasped to one another of their own free will. This is most clearly evidenced in the extended passage below:

Miss Morstan and I stood together, and her hand was in mine. A wondrous subtle thing is love, for here were we two who had never seen each other before that day, between whom no word or even look of affection had ever passed, and yet now in an hour of trouble our hands instinctively sought for each other. I have marvelled at it since, but at the time it seemed the most natural thing that I should go out to her so, and, as she has often told me, there was in her also the instinct to turn to me for comfort and protection. So we stood hand in hand, like two children, and there was peace in our hearts for all the dark things that surrounded us. (Doyle 2010, 79)

Here, the couple's hands once more reveal their true desires, but they do so in a way that is deemed natural, instinctive, and even childlike. In identifying these qualities, Watson not only attributes the actions of their hands to a type of scientific worldview, but predicts the natural result of their love, i.e., their gesture is not only childlike, but will—in fact—lead to the production of more children. It is this reproductive futurity which outweighs for Mary the loss of the jewels.

Incidentally, Peter F. Murphy has traced the term "family jewels" back to Victorian origin. According to Murphy, "family jewels" was "an allusion to the economic value of a man's genitals" (2001, 52). The term conflated reproduction with terms of "business, property, and political economy," denoting "their great value and their role in creating a family" (52). Thus, while Mary misses out on the Rajah's treasure, which has now been stolen so many times that it is rather difficult to keep count, she does succeed in obtaining these latter jewels of Watson's.

Conclusion

In this way, *The Sign of Four* continues to propagate the types of narratives that Hazel states

were deeply ingrained in Victorian palmistry. Through analyzing these notions within the novel, clear contrasts emerge between powerful, British, masculine hands and effeminate, colonized hands. While Watson and Tonga seem to represent the extremes of this ideology, the hands of characters like Thaddeus Sholto and Jonathan Small show that *The Sign of Four* places many of these hands somewhere on a spectrum, through hierarchical layers of identity.

As a last case study, I would like to return to where I began this essay, with the hands of Sherlock Holmes himself. As noted previously, the novel both opens and closes on the image of Holmes's "long, white, nervous fingers" (Doyle 2010, 49). Based on this description alone, Holmes's hands might be read as effeminate, yet their actions are almost always masculine: inspecting, climbing, shooting. This is further complicated when we consider that Holmes's hands, which Watson here describes as "nervous," are later paired with the narrator's claim that Holmes's lack of emotion makes him an "automaton . . . positively inhuman" (61). While this might complicate a reading of Holmes in terms of gender, placing him somewhere on a spectrum as well, it is just as useful to read this as a separate category in its own right—perhaps as a new type of masculinity or identity undefined by biological gender, unmarked despite his hands. In this way, *The Sign of Four* reinscribes a number of gendered and racialized narratives while simultaneously suggesting the possibility of breaking free from these constraints. However, it is a possibility that is yet unrealized, still uncharted. For indeed, while the object toward which Holmes's long, nervous fingers reach—a cocaine bottle that Mary's affair has distracted him from—certainly holds the possibility of escape, it is an escape marked by an entirely new kind of experience.

Endnotes:

1. *Cheiromancy*, *cheirosophy*, and *cheiromnomy* function as alternative spellings to the terms *chiromancy*, *chirosophy*, and *chirognomy*.
2. Ruth Clayton Windscheffel traces Victorians' often ambiguous relationship to spiritualism and, more specifically, the practice of palmistry through the perspective of William Ewart Gladstone, the Prime Minister of Great Britain from 1868 to 1894. According to Windscheffel, "Gladstone's desire to discover, classify and utilize new knowledge for the ultimate benefit of humanity, as he understood the concept, contributed significantly to bolstering his attraction to spiritualism and sustained his solid, serious and openminded engagement with it" (Windscheffel 2006, 23). Although he likely did not endorse spiritualist practices, Windscheffel concludes, Gladstone's engagement with them was nevertheless marked by an "insatiable intellectual curiosity" (24).
3. See Rosa Baughan's *The Handbook of Palmistry* (1995, 9-13).
4. In a scientific article published in 2018, titled "Evaluation of Upper Extremity Anthropometric Measurements in Terms of Sex Estimation," the authors conclude that "[h]and measurements provide quite accurate information concerning an individual's sex, age and height" (Uzun et al. 2018, 48). Indeed, they report, "[O]n the basis of a single variable, the most reliable variable in sex differentiation was hand width" (48). Similar results have been reported in a number of similar contemporary studies—many of which are referenced in this 2018 publication.
5. In tracing these still-prevalent beliefs around hand size and their correlation to inner traits into the present, one's mind wanders to the 45th president of the United States and the media's frequent interest in the smallness of his hands.

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