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Shaping the Past: Victorian Medievalism and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The White Company*

With the captivating BBC *Sherlock* series set in contemporary London now in preparation for its third season and the creative CBS series *Elementary* with Johnny Lee Miller and Lucy Liu as his Watson, interest in Sherlock Holmes and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle is great. But Conan Doyle's historical fiction, which he was very fond of, is not as well known. Both the Holmes stories and the historical fiction link and comment on the past and present, and they focus on heroic possibility, valor, and honor, although in different ways. *The White Company* (1891), set in the 14th century, is an adventure novel, but more significantly it is an example of how the Victorians imagined, believed in, and created their medieval past.

The paper I am proposing will discuss how *The White Company* illustrates the contending purposes within Victorian Medievalism (e.g., Felluga, Wiener, Girouard). On the one hand, the Victorians nostalgically invoked their medieval past as an antidote to their present, viewing it as a time of individualism (e.g., heroic possibility), order and stability, justice, and religious faith. But they simultaneously invoked it as a means of justifying progress in terms of how far Victorian society had improved upon a rudimentary and violent past while building upon its English institutions and values. How can medievalism hold these contending, competing views? It is through fiction [e.g., Bulwer-Lytton's *Harold* (1848), Kingsley's *Hereward* (1866)] about this medieval past that the Victorians could believe in the virtues of their past even while consciously romanticizing it, a means of shaping and creating a past that gives meaning to the present by "[employing] Romance in the aid of History" (Bulwer-Lytton). However, this integration is not so neat, and fictional texts reveal these contradictions. Written at the end of the

nineteenth century, *The White Company* justifies imperialism while warning of its violence, emphasizes the importance of religious values while celebrating man's physical, military nature, and celebrates strong, decisive leadership while showing the human cost of such leadership.

In *The White Company*, the thoughtful Alleyne Edricson wrestles with his desire to embrace the world of action and heroic possibility outside of the abbey while fearful of its violence and vice. His companion Hordle John, thrown out of the abbey, is an impetuous man of action who faces challenges with confidence in his physical strength. Samkin Aylward, also a man of action, lives by a ruder form of chivalry than knight Sir Nigel Loring, the exemplar of the chivalric code. The interactions of these characters and their exploits as members of the White Company, a skilled band of archers, reveal the values and virtues of 14<sup>th</sup> century England where honor, courage, and duty are displayed in the bold, certain actions of men at arms who address problems directly and solve them, if necessary at the point of a sword or arrow. But their interactions also expose the violence of this 14<sup>th</sup> century world as well as the vice and deception that are difficult to subordinate or overlook, even in the face of heroic exploits in daily life and on the battlefield of national events. The novel's last sentences appear to unify these contending viewpoints, speaking directly to Victorian readers: "So they lived, these men, in their own lusty, cheery fashion—rude and rough, but honest and kind. Let us thank God if we have out grown their vices. Let us pray to God that we may ever hold their virtues" (363). But the tone here reveals more hope than certainty, heaping uneasy praise on John, Sam, and their friends who are at home in a forest inn. Alleyne is not part of this group since he marries Sir Nigel's daughter, suggesting a merging of physical action, intellect, and sensitivity in the chivalric code of knighthood, whose possibility, however, seems far-fetched at the end of the Victorian period when Victorianism itself and the empire that helped define it were being questioned.