

# ROUGE ÉTUDE OR HOW SHERLOCK HOLMES BECAME A MISOGYNIST

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a play  
by Deborah Magid



*“And now for lunch, and then for Norman-Neruda. Her attack and her bowing are splendid. What's that little thing of Chopin's she plays so magnificently: Tra-la-la-lira-lira-lay.” Leaning back in the cab, this amateur bloodhound carolled away like a lark.*

*Arthur Conan Doyle's A Study in Scarlet*

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## CHARACTERS (3W; 1M)

**WILMA (WILHELMINE) NORMAN-NERUDA**, female, a very proper Victorian, as susceptible and quixotic as a fine violin, 50

**SHERLOCK HOLMES**, male, callow, such a virgin that he has never kissed, 24

**STRAD**, female, embodiment of a Stradivarius violin, 151 (*over 60*) naked or in a bodystocking, with violin eff-holes on her torso

**MRS. HUDSON**, female, garrulous middle-class landlady, 50s-70s

## SETTING

The action occurs over a period of three days in London, England in March, 1881, in a claustrophobically tiny dressing room at St. James Hall, and in Holmes' sitting room at 221B Baker Street. *NOTE*: Wilma's dressing room may compose one corner of the space, yet somehow be clearly part of this room. There is a mantelpiece or bookshelf, loveseat, assorted other Victorian tables, chairs, chests, Oriental rugs, oil lamps, bric-a-brac.

## SCENES

Scene One. Norman-Neruda's dressing room at St. James Hall, after the concert.

Scene Two. Holmes' drawing room, 221B Baker Street, near midnight.

Scene Three. Immediately following.

Scene Four. Immediately following.

Scene Five. Holmes' drawing room, the next afternoon.

Scene Six. Immediately following.

Scene Seven. Immediately following.

Scene Eight. Holmes' drawing room, late afternoon the following day.

Scene Nine. Immediately following.

Scene Ten. Immediately following.

**Scene One. Norman-Neruda's tiny dressing room in St. James Hall, after the concert.**

*Down a hallway, the applause of a large audience swells, dwindles.  
WILMA NORMAN-NERUDA, in concert gown, violin and bow in hand,  
enters, wheels, stops in the doorway.*

WILMA

You are not yet my husband *Maestro* Hallé and even if you were, we rehearsed we discussed we reached an accord yet in front of an audience you did as you damn well pleased DO NOT CORRECT MY LANGUAGE. You will collect me for supper when I am ready and not a moment before.

*Facing the room SHE plays Mendelssohn's Wedding March fast and loud.*

HOLMES

*(entering)* That was it!– the tempo, the fervor–

*HOLMES flings himself at her feet, kissing. SHE catches his battered leather violin case and suddenly here is STRAD, ethereal, invisible. WILMA senses HER presence like extra oxygen or a blanketing fog.*

WILMA

What? Who?

STRAD

*[where am I?]*

HOLMES

Why did your performance leave its passion, obsession on the dressing-room floor? Play for someone who appreciates you, someone who knows the difference.

STRAD

*[who is this person why do I feel different what is this room is that a Stradivari she's holding how can I see all this when I'm inside my case]*

WILMA

Aren't, aren't you rather, er, young to, "know the difference"?

HOLMES

You are fatigued by your exertions–

WILMA

*(blush)* A gentleman does not speak of a lady's–

STRAD

*[he's never behaved like this before]*

HOLMES

Or something else?

WILMA

Kind, er, sir did you lose your way in the corridor?

HOLMES

Hardly.

WILMA

Perhaps you will be so good as to retreat–

HOLMES

I spent sparse shekels to hear the finest violinist in the world!

WILMA

If you would calm yourself?

HOLMES

Why did I hear namby-pamby pap and pabulum?!

WILMA

Ask the *Maestro* at the piano.

HOLMES

Why do women always blame men?

WILMA

Why do men not protect women?

HOLMES

Madam I have heard you play that Chopin brilliantly in concerts past ah! perhaps as your age increases, your powers decrease–

WILMA

How dare you?

HOLMES

Disprove my hypothesis.

*WILMA plays that Chopin brilliantly.*

HOLMES

*(sings along)* TRA-LA-LA-LIRA-LIRA-LAY– That's it, the Chopin I came to hear!

STRAD

*[let me out of my case I need her to play me]*

*STRAD dizzies WILMA, who stops playing.*

HOLMES  
If you can be this brilliant at your age—

WILMA  
Ah, the arrogance of youth.

HOLMES  
I daresay I'm eloquent

WILMA  
in the Queen's English only?

HOLMES  
Chemistry!

WILMA  
A jargon

HOLMES  
a lexicon

WILMA  
You purport to know the language of music—

*WILMA plays some Bach.*

STRAD  
*[yes yes yes wait wait play ME not this pale imitation play ME]*

HOLMES  
It's your own fault

WILMA  
if that is flattery

HOLMES  
what may I give

WILMA  
I rely on your honor

HOLMES

how to convince you

WILMA  
have pity

HOLMES

Take my Strad.

WILMA

Stradivarius? You, you own a Stradivarius?

HOLMES

Shouldn't I?

WILMA

That battered case holds a precious instrument?

*STRAD*

*[yes yes yes I am Strad take me out of my case]*

*STRAD impels HOLMES to offer his violin.*

HOLMES

I'll hold yours while you play mine—

WILMA

The Ernst Stradivarius was a gift to me from emissaries of the Queen.

HOLMES

Will you play it? Just once?

WILMA

What is its name?

HOLMES

Alas, not named. I believe it to be his last. But see, you know his mark.

WILMA

It's best you leave. My *fiancé* will collect me at any moment.

HOLMES

Then the rumours are true, the *Maestro* is marrying up.

WILMA

Why do you insult everything I hold dear?

HOLMES

Your attack and your bowing are splendid, your musical phrasing belies your sex.

WILMA

Your mother taught you, didn't she.

Might have.

HOLMES

[of course she did]

STRAD

Namby-pamby pap indeed.

WILMA

I'm not so young

HOLMES

nor I so old

WILMA

HOLMES  
you are ageless like my Strad!

*WILMA takes Holmes' violin, STRAD appears more solidly, somehow. WILMA nearly faints, good thing she's sitting down. SHE plays.*

STRAD  
(speaking aloud) Dio mio.

WILMA  
The overtones, are rich, and dense, as if I played, two, instruments at once.

STRAD  
(speaking aloud) Santa Maria.

HOLMES  
You command, you relent, like this, this, this, this— wallpaper!

WILMA  
Wallpaper?

HOLMES  
The resonances of dark against light, they, vibrate chromatically, the swans' necks and heads, see them? they undulate like Chopin's melody, yes, and this intricate feathered repeat echoes his counterpoint, look, the wings' plumes' upswEEP mimics a rising melodic line— the bones' barbs and barbules and barbicels bedecked in gold are staccati, by Jove, I can't believe I didn't see it sooner, the hamuli, hypopenae, the distal umbilicus, the filoplume

STRAD  
[there he goes rabbiting on she'll never play me again at this rate]

HOLMES (cont'd)  
and semiplume mirror the hemidemisemiquavers that emanate under your strong yet delicate fingers. Perfection can be beautiful, but beauty is so seldom perfect, don't you find, such as the

Like the  
prayer rugs of  
prayer rugs of  
HOLMES & WILMA  
Persia.  
(*aloud*) Play play play.  
(*senses STRAD*)  
May we have. More such. D-disquisitions?  
Why did you stop?  
Stop? I beg your pardon?  
I, er, admire so very much your bravery.  
My bravery? How, er, kind.  
You, er, defy convention, given your endeavor's unseemly nature.  
Perhaps I *am* brave.  
Why aren't you playing me?  
Playing?  
Perhaps female conductors are next.

WNN

HOLMES

WILMA

HOLMES & WILMA  
Persia.

STRAD

WILMA

HOLMES

STRAD

WILMA

HOLMES

WILMA

HOLMES

WILMA

STRAD

WILMA

HOLMES



WILMA

Critic! You are that critic Mr. Chorley, from the *Athenaeum* magazine!

HOLMES

How can you think me so low?

WILMA

That shabby review—

HOLMES

It took proper exception to the *tempi*—

WILMA

You wanted that I gallop off like a four-in-hand—

HOLMES

Your graceful virtuosity—

WILMA

Flatter me in print, why don't you?

HOLMES

The *Maestro*'s reputation

WILMA

reputation, you risk mine

HOLMES

I'm not Chorley, I'm not a critic!

(*A beat.*)

WILMA

I beg your pardon?

HOLMES

Humbly given.

STRAD

That's a first.

WILMA

Is this the first time you have offered pardon?

STRAD

[*I said first and she said first no it couldn't be*]

HOLMES

It would be churlish to refuse?

WILMA

Churlish? You burst into my dressing room unannounced, insult the *Maestro*, play parlor games with words, debase logic—

HOLMES

Logic is sacrosanct, despite your female state your fine musician's mind should easily grasp its elegant simplicity.

WILMA

Elegance is not simple and nor is logic necessarily elegant.

HOLMES

The brain's iterations are forthright, not female.

WILMA

How can you equate logic with misogyny?

HOLMES

There's no prejudice involved, the female mind has been proven inferior.

WILMA

This female will best you at your logic game, by the Grace of God.

HOLMES

I'm in deadly earnest.

WILMA

Is not the widow who plays for her livelihood?

*STRAD*

*[why doesn't she play me]*

HOLMES

A duel.

WILMA

A duet.

*STRAD*

*[they're at it again]*

HOLMES

A, er, duet.

WILMA

Your Stradivarius, you must play it at least occasionally.

[she said my name]

STRAD

It is an occasion whenever I play.

HOLMES

Each instrument's logic is superceded only by its resonant connections—

WILMA

In counterpoint, then!

HOLMES

Mutual dependency—

WILMA

You play mine, I'll play yours?

HOLMES

*WILMA doesn't get the double-entendre.*

Each instrument has its own afflictions.

WILMA

Pleasures?

HOLMES

Possibilities. Prepare yourself.

WILMA

*WILMA begins Bach's Concerto for Two Violins. HOLMES blanches, doubts, berates himself for doubting, jumps in, STRAD impels, HOLMES plays the best he has ever played in his short life. ALL become visibly, physically aroused.*

When I win, what will I?

HOLMES

How did you gain entry?

WILMA

Shall I insult your mind

HOLMES

WILMA  
my fine musician's mind

HOLMES

with an answer?

*Insultare*

WILMA

Latin

HOLMES

to jump or trample upon

WILMA

HOLMES

any move I might make upon your person would not be designed to give adverse pain

WILMA

there is something in the set of your shoulders, yes, at each of my concerts you sit in the stalls half-slumped your knees in, intriguing motion.

STRAD

He pets me with his feet.

WILMA

*(looks around)* Do you have a pet?

*STRAD*

*[you heard me!]*

HOLMES

*(what is she looking for?)* Er, how would a concert ticket afford me dressing-room entry?

WILMA

A polite enquiry of the stage doorman, is politeness even in your quiver?

HOLMES

His assumption that we were already known to each other was just that—

WILMA

You are known to him already, of course, each time I alight the stage-door steps, you stand in the shadows and bow

HOLMES

to no man and certainly no woman

WILMA

mocking

incline your aquiline head, then, half-

HOLMES

I could not mock you

WILMA

In those moments I query my 'fine musician's mind,' "Who can this young man be, he who observes yet never approaches?"

HOLMES

I, er-

WILMA

"His image haunts me."

HOLMES

I do? I mean, where, where do I haunt you?

WILMA

At supper, betimes. Dancing? Listening to the better class of cabaret artiste.

HOLMES

Has my image enjoyed the, er, free pouring of Champagne and, er, closeted rides in cabriolets?

WILMA

Nothing so intimate as that.

HOLMES

And homecomings?

WILMA

Home. Comings?

HOLMES

By the color you wear, I see you are in the late stages of mourning, do you return to an empty house?

WILMA

My second son

HOLMES

your *second* son

WILMA

is about your age.

HOLMES

He wears holes in the rug, worrying for his mother's return.

WILMA

Should he not feel protective of me?

HOLMES

It ought to be the other way around.

WILMA

I am a paragon of motherhood.

HOLMES

I deduce that he has been off at his own debauches, arriving with time only to whip off his neckerchief exchange boots for carpet slippers plump up the fire and fling himself

WILMA

into my favorite

WILMA & HOLMES

armchair.

*STRAD*

*[at least they're in concert]*

HOLMES

You sometimes find him avidly reading a book upside-down.

WILMA

How do you know that?

HOLMES

Go on, go on.

WILMA

One time, a brazen young woman even was hidden—

HOLMES

Let me deduce! She was hiding behind— the coal scuttle.

WILMA

How did you—?

HOLMES

Elementary.

WILMA

Neither chair nor sofa nor skirted table, the smallest solid thing in the room.

HOLMES

‘T’ wasn’t a guess.

WILMA

This game just became interesting.

Just?  
HOLMES

A clue?  
WILMA

Why would I make a concession at this juncture?  
HOLMES

I also may concede– something– presently.  
WILMA

Interesting gambit. Your favorite armchair–?  
HOLMES

It is pulled near to the fire  
WILMA

HOLMES  
stoked in expectation of your imminent return

will have been  
WILMA  
and the young woman

HOLMES  
on the hearthrug

WILMA  
near the warmth. Of course.

HOLMES  
Your fine musician’s mind is keen, unlike the quicksand most women cart about above their ears.

You underestimate the fairer sex.  
WILMA

HOLMES  
Why do you cavil, I credit you with being a thinking person who analyzes all things within his purview at each moment of every day of life!

Like a musician.  
WILMA

HOLMES  
*A maestro*, a master–

WILMA

A mistress of the form.

HOLMES

I, er, a toast, a musical toast.

STRAD

Let *her* play me again and again and again and again.

WILMA

Hello?

HOLMES

Er, hello?

WILMA

I thought I heard, or felt a vibration.

HOLMES

A noise from the street, let me soothe your savage breast, your, er, I, uh—

*HOLMES mechanically plays a silly song.*

STRAD

That tickles.

WILMA

A ticklish song.

STRAD

*[she DOES hear me she must]*

HOLMES

I'll slip to your silken feet and worship as you deserve.

WILMA

Avoid blasphemy, sir.

HOLMES

Say that music is your true religion.

WILMA

You— interest me.

HOLMES & STRAD

I do?

*HOLMES plays and sings. WILMA is dizzied by STRAD.*



HOLMES (*sings*)  
THIS SWEET AND MERRY, MERRY MONTH,  
AND MERRY, MERRY MONTH OF MAY,  
AND MERRY MONTH OF MAY, OF MAY!

WILMA  
(*struggling to regain control*) Yet it is March. And. Only the beginning.

HOLMES & STRAD  
The sweet beginning?

WILMA  
You flatter this old woman.

HOLMES & STRAD  
Ageless artist, full flush of ripeness—

WILMA  
Blushing like a girl.

*HOLMES plays a weird composition, beautifully. ALL are visibly aroused.*

WILMA (*cont'd*)  
That composer is not, er, known to me.

STRAD  
He was to me but this is something new.

WILMA  
(*hearing STRAD*) Who is it?

HOLMES  
That would be telling. But you approve, say you do, of course it doesn't matter if you don't only, well, it rather does, I feel a blush, a rush of blood, how odd, to have known without research, evidence perhaps you think me mad and placate perhaps it was my Stradivari caught your fancy keeps me occupied it does whenever loneliness encroaches yet its tintinnabulations cannot satisfy my cravings sweet vibrations dense enmesh me in a lush cocoon of velvet sound.

(*A beat.*)

WILMA  
You don't say.

(*A beat.*)

HOLMES  
How can the future depend on this one thing yet it does

WILMA

it was. Of? A piece with its player?

HOLMES

You knew all along.

WILMA

(no)

HOLMES

Come away, let me give you supper.

STRAD

What about me?

WILMA

What about—? At any rate, the *Maestro* will collect me presently.

HOLMES

The *Maestro* was leaving as I entered the stage door.

WILMA

He would not.

HOLMES

In the company of a gaunt, elderly fellow, just up from. Er, Sussex.

WILMA

You spoke with him?

HOLMES

We are not acquainted.

WILMA

Then you knew the Sussex fellow.

HOLMES

Of course not! The peculiar color of mud spattered on the gentleman's trouser-end was unique, the film of dust upon his spectacles a precisely matching hue, both found only in.(*deciding*) Sussex the cinders on his cuff bespoke a recent journey by rail, the *Maestro*'s pained air and the proprietary grip in which he held the gentleman's arm, their shared, surprised pleasure at meeting argue that this elder fellow is a relative. Oh, by chance, while I was detained in the entryway, this note was entrusted.

WILMA

And *now* to me you hand this, now?

HOLMES

You're welcome?

WILMA

He has gone to sup with a long-lost friend, not a relative, and, from Yorkshire.

HOLMES

Don't trifle with me.

WILMA

How would you know the color of mud?

HOLMES

Yorkshire, how could it have been Yorkshire?

WILMA

That was not a jest?

HOLMES

My research was definitive!

WILMA

Calm yourself, my dear, sweet boy.

HOLMES

Er.

*STRAD*

*[he hasn't felt this much since his mother and father]*

WILMA

Better?

HOLMES

Better better better have you ever noticed upon repeating a word that it ceases to have meaning?

WILMA

Er, no.

HOLMES

Unlike. Er. This wallpaper?

*STRAD*

Why don't you people just kiss?

WILMA

Or rather, like?

HOLMES

Like. Unlike.

STRAD

What is this “like”?

*HOLMES kisses WILMA – his first-ever kiss – in the Victorian Era – in a public place someone could enter at any moment. STRAD purses her lips, reaching. HOLMES taps WILMA playfully with the bow.*

WILMA

That will suffice.

HOLMES

You live by the bow, die by the bow, does its smart tapping rapture not impel you to pleasure? Or. Perhaps. Might you compel me?

*STRAD tries to intercept the bow, fails.*

WILMA

This disturbance on the air.

HOLMES

My Lady, I am benighted, shattered by your brilliance, begging only the sufferance of your continued presence. Please, will you sup?

STRAD

Please?

WILMA

Please? Without knowing even the name of my host?

HOLMES

I am the one and only Sherlock Holmes.

*(A beat.)*

WILMA

Should your reputation have preceded you?

HOLMES

It, is, a, work, in, progress.

WILMA

A serviceable name, at any rate.

HOLMES

Sufficient?

*STRAD impels.*

WILMA

Why do I yearn for a surfeit?

STRAD

A surfeit a surface a sap-soaked fritch. They see me they hear me they couldn't they will they will they will they do. (*impels*) Do something!

HOLMES

Supper?

WILMA

Surely.

HOLMES

Madam, I'm Adam.

STRAD

(*triumphantly*) I am Eve! I am Eve!

*WILMA looks around, bewildered.*

**Scene Two. Holmes' sitting room, 221B Baker Street, after they have supped.**

*WILMA's violin case sits to the side with her cloak and small, neat hat. WILMA plays violin in part to keep HOLMES at bay. SHE knows SHE shouldn't be in a man's rooms, particularly not after dark, particularly not after Champagne, but here SHE is. SHE plays for at least two full minutes, alternately aroused and keep-away; STRAD physically teases Holmes (who can neither see nor hear Strad at this point, but is affected by her); HOLMES becomes aroused, abhors his lack of control, and succumbs again to his arousal; STRAD is always testing her boundaries; a riding crop is in obvious evidence [Holmes impelled to hold it, whap himself, conduct]; HOLMES interrupts WILMA's playing by the violent impulsion to kiss her.*

*Church bells chime the half-hour.*

*STRAD somehow joins the embrace while having no physicality that either can sense. HOLMES runs the crop across WILMA's body, raps HER smartly. SHE shies. HE is abject, SHE relents, THEY all somehow kiss. WILMA tentatively raps HOLMES with the bow. HE draws in a sharp breath—*

MRS. HUDSON

(*offstage*) I know he's a handsome one but I can't have coppers stopping by in the middle of the night with "pressing" missives— (*enters*) [MORE]