

From Mercury to Mars: The Shadow of the Great Detective: Orson Welles and Sherlock Holmes on the Air

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Abstract

I predict that one day an obsessed fan — maybe you, dear reader — will devise a complete and thorough catalogue of all the characters that Orson Welles ever played (or claimed to have played) on radio.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Article, From Mercury To Mars, Radio, Sound Studies, A Brad Schwartz



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I predict that one day an obsessed fan — maybe you, dear reader — will devise a complete and thorough catalogue of all the characters that Orson Welles ever played (or claimed to have played) on radio.

It would be a colossal, almost nonsensical list, a set of clues that expose an experiment in sheer artistic ego that was nearly criminal: Hamlet, The Shadow, Fiorello La Guardia, The Count of Monte Cristo, Rochester from *Jane Eyre*, General Zaroff from "The Most Dangerous Game," Dr. Corey from *Donovan's Brain*, Mr. Jingle from *The Pickwick Papers*, Martin Arrowsmith from Sinclair Lewis's novel, Paul Madvig from Dashiell Hammett's *The Glass Key* ... and not just Joseph Conrad's Marlow, but his Kurtz, not just Bram Stoker's Seward but his Dracula.

To that list, we can also add another pair: Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and his Moriarty, characters that Welles had apparently found compelling since his boyhood.

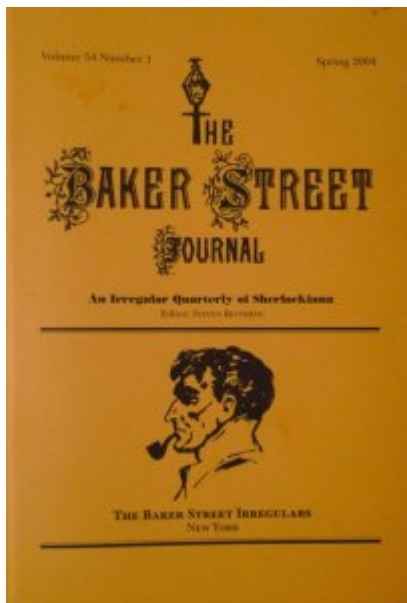
This week **From Mercury to Mars**, our series on the radio works of Orson Welles in conjunction with [Antenna](#), continues with an exciting piece on the connection between Welles and Holmes by a new voice among Welles scholars. **SO!** is delighted to welcome **A. Brad Schwartz**, who co-wrote the recent [PBS special](#) on the "War of the Worlds" panic, based on his research in archives at the University of Michigan. Schwartz also has a forthcoming book on the subject.

But first, as promised, a detour to Baker Street.

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Perhaps lost among the many eulogies Orson Welles received after his death in 1985 was a brief nod in [The Baker Street Journal](#)—the "irregular quarterly of Sherlockiana" put out by the Baker Street Irregulars, America's leading society dedicated to the study and appreciation of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories. It was through Welles's work as a radio artist, they wrote, that "the Sherlockian world benefitted greatly from his talents" (*Baker Street Journal* 36, 1: 43)



A recent edition of the Baker Street Journal.

The association worked both ways. Sherlock Holmes hovers over Welles's radio work, popping up at key points as Welles pursued the stardom he would win with *War of the Worlds*. As Paul Heyer notes, Holmes's stories bookended Welles's remarkable career on the air, from his earliest experimentation with the medium as a student to his final radio performance in the 1950s (*The Medium and the Magician* 209). Even Welles's most famous radio role before the *War of the Worlds* broadcast—the ethereal crime-fighter *The Shadow*—owed a considerable debt to the Great Detective, and to the formula Conan Doyle had pioneered. The interplay between Lamont Cranston, brilliant amateur detective, and Margot Lane, his plucky sidekick, shows clear echoes of Holmes and Watson. Those echoes were encouraged, perhaps, by [the show's first story editor, Edith Meiser](#), who produced a long-running and popular *Sherlock Holmes* radio series in the 1930s and 1940s that [earned her the recognition of the Baker Street Irregulars](#) at a time when they didn't accept woman as members.

Welles's radio work, apart from *War of the Worlds*, is too often reduced to a kind of transitional phase between his work in the theater and in film. But in this post, I want to take another approach, looking at the influence of the Holmes stories on Welles's on-air career, thereby helping to shed light on his remarkable contributions to the medium. It was partly by learning from Conan Doyle's example of great storytelling that Welles reshaped the rules of radio drama.

Welles's dabbling in the gaslit world of Holmes and Watson can be traced, like so much of his later success, back to [the Todd School for Boys in Woodstock, Illinois](#). There Welles began in earnest his experimentation with film, theater and radio under the tutelage of schoolmaster Roger Hill, and with the school's remarkable array of resources at his command. Welles first grabbed Hill's attention, appropriately enough, on Halloween Eve, 1926—exactly twelve years before the *War of the Worlds* broadcast—in the guise of Sherlock Holmes. That night, according to Barbara Leaming, [Welles took center stage dressed as Holmes in a show put on by Todd students](#), only to

toss off his deerstalker cap and Inverness cape to reveal a flowing theatrical cloak ([Orson Welles: a Biography](#) 22). Then he launched into an elaborate magic show. Welles was eleven—"a cute little round-faced boy," as Hill's wife, Hortense, later described him—but his undeniable panache immediately registered with Hill. Indeed, that was the idea; Welles, already an inveterate seducer of adults, had set out to catch Hill's eye, having sensed upon his arrival at this somewhat stuffy school that this youthful, energetic teacher was someone he could get along with.

Recognizing Welles's potential, Hill would let the student essentially take over Todd's drama department and turn it into his own repertory company. It was a major opportunity for Welles to stretch his creative muscles, and Hill gave invaluable shape and direction to Welles's exploration. The school even had its own radio station, for which Welles wrote and performed his first radio dramas. The very first was [a Sherlock Holmes adaptation written in about 1928](#), when Welles was thirteen. This show was apparently never produced, but it marks his first foray into the medium that would make him famous.

It's not surprising that Welles's first radio drama would be a work of fan fiction, and he could not have picked a better example of the craft of storytelling. Much of the pleasure of reading the Holmes stories comes from their first-person perspective. Dr. Watson is a magnificent storyteller, painting an affectionate if complex portrait of his friendship with Sherlock Holmes, and through him Conan Doyle establishes a genuine rapport with the reader. "[O]ne cannot imagine feeling gauche or ill at ease in Watson's presence," wrote the poet (and brilliant radio writer) Stephen Vincent Benét, in a paean to Holmes's faithful companion, "the very thought of him is as stodgy and comfortable as a Morris chair" ("[Dr. Watson](#)" 154).

When, in 1938, Welles debuted his own radio series on CBS, *The Mercury Theatre on the Air*, it was similarly based around the power and intimacy of the first-person narrator. Its original title, *First Person Singular*, reflected Welles's belief that radio was fundamentally a narrative, and not a dramatic, form, which worked best when the protagonist engaged directly with the audience. [As Welles explained it to *The New York Times*](#): "When a fellow leans back in his chair and begins: 'Now, this is how it happened'—the listener feels that the narrator is taking him into his confidence; he begins to take a personal interest in the outcome."

That sense of intimacy between narrator and audience is a major part of what makes the Holmes stories work; readers come to trust Watson even when perhaps they shouldn't. As author Max Allan Collins explains it, "Watson is not merely a reporter, but the human filter through whom the sometimes outlandish plots are made to seem more plausible." ([The History of Mystery](#) 27). That he still exists in the minds of many fans not as a fictional character, but as a real person, is a testament to this effect, and Welles recognized its power when combined with that most intimate of media: radio.

Indeed, it wasn't long before the Mercury Theatre found its way, in Welles's words, "back to Baker Street," with [an episode](#) entitled simply *Sherlock Holmes* on September 25, 1938. Rather than directly dramatizing any of the Conan Doyle stories, Welles instead adapted [William Gillette's 1899 play](#) based on them. Welles had just come off of a spectacular failure in bringing another of Gillette's plays, the ribald farce *Too Much Johnson*, to the stage, complete with filmed sequences

that proved unique but impractical. These segments, Welles's first professional film, [were only recently rediscovered](#).



William Gillette as Sherlock Holmes

At the time of the Mercury broadcast, Gillette's *Sherlock Holmes* was still the most popular and well-known adaptation of Conan Doyle's stories. [Gillette himself](#) so resembled the detective, both physically and temperamentally, that he effectively became the character in the public mind. The lasting image we have of Holmes, as a willowy man in a deerstalker cap and Inverness cape, with a drop-stem pipe under his aquiline nose—the costume Welles wore that night in the Todd School in 1926—comes from Gillette, not Conan Doyle. "It is too little to say that William Gillette resembled Sherlock Holmes," Welles said at the top of this broadcast. "Sherlock Holmes looks exactly like William Gillette."

However, because it is a drama and not a narrative, the Gillette play lacks one key component of the Holmes formula: Dr. Watson's narration. And so Welles, at the outset of his broadcast, had his Watson (Ray Collins) introduce himself to the audience and bring them into the story:

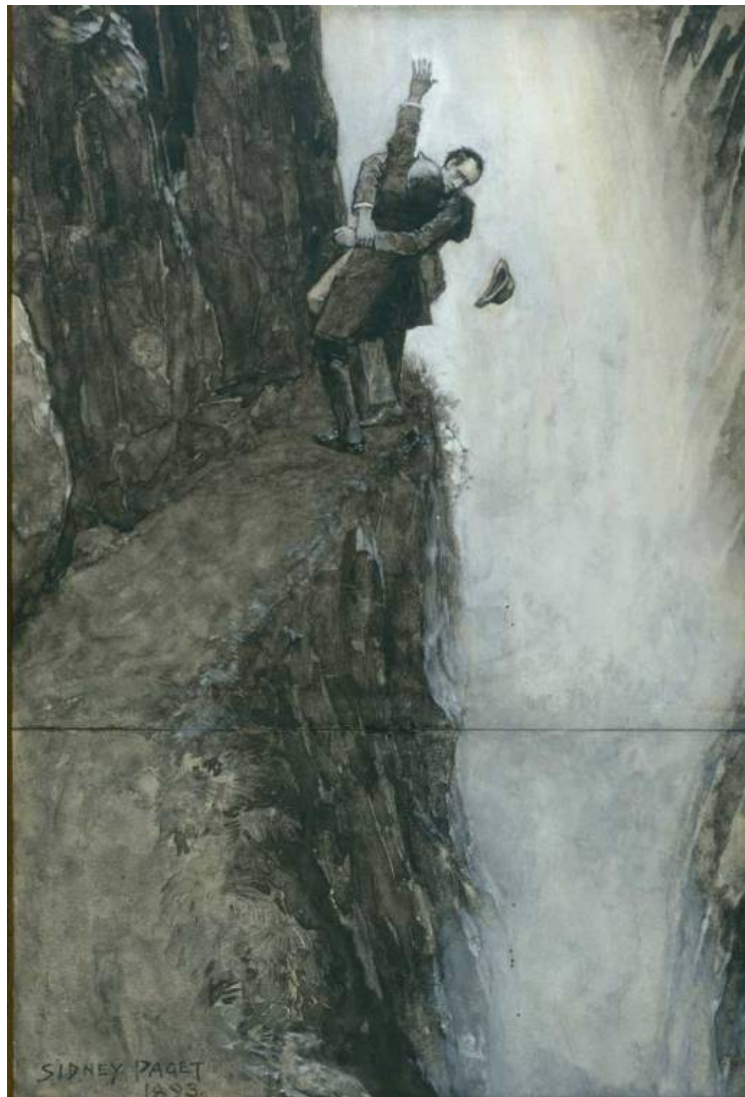
<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/holmes1.mp3>

The monologue, like Welles's introduction, is studded with Sherlockian references, some of them slightly obscure, suggesting its author had a real regard and affection for these stories. The authorship of the Mercury radio plays has always been contentious—this was before Howard Koch joined the staff, so *Holmes* was likely a collaboration between Welles and his producer, John Houseman—but one thing is clear: the addition of Watson's monologue to Gillette's drama is Welles's theory of the "first person singular" at work.

If there's one wrong note in the show, it's the lead actor. Welles as Holmes sounds bored and effete, with the affected accent of a young man desperate to hide the fact that he's from

Wisconsin. Because Welles's Sherlock lives in the upper register of his voice, he cannot use the full *basso profundo* power of his instrument, and so comes off sounding airy, disinterested and inauthentic. This is the voice of the foppish playboy Lamont Cranston, not the manic detective Sherlock Holmes. Compare, for example, a clip from the Mercury broadcast with [Gillette playing the same scene two years before](#). Even at the age of eighty-two, and just one year before his death, Gillette's Holmes has more verve than the twenty-three-year-old Welles's:

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/holmes2.mp3>



Sherlock Holmes and Moriarty at the Reichenbach Falls, an 1893 illustration by Sidney Paget in Strand Magazine.

It would be fourteen years before Welles returned to Baker Street on the radio, but when he did it was in the perfect Sherlockian role for his remarkable voice—not the detective himself, but his nemesis: Professor Moriarty. Welles apparently liked to play opposing characters; in [the first Mercury broadcast](#), he'd performed as both Count Dracula and Dr. Seward, and played both Marlow and Kurtz in his adaptation of [Heart of Darkness](#). But as an actor, particularly on the radio, Welles was more convincing in sinister roles than in heroic ones, partly because of his deep voice, and

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partly because playing a villain allowed him to cloak himself comfortably in melodrama. Even his radio heroes, like The Shadow and [Harry Lime](#), have more than a touch of menace about them. When it came to playing Holmes and Moriarty, it should be no surprise that he did better as the latter than as the former.

By 1952, Welles was in England, working with producer Harry Alan Towers on a couple of radio series, including one based on [his character from *The Third Man* \(1949\)](#). Towers wanted Welles for the lead in a Sherlock Holmes series he was producing for the BBC, but Welles, struggling to complete his film of *Othello* (1952), was too busy. All Welles could manage was a guest slot as Moriarty in the last episode: an adaptation of the Conan Doyle story "The Final Problem," in which the author famously tried (and failed) to kill off his detective.

Opposite John Gielgud as Holmes and Ralph Richardson as Watson, Welles gives one of his best performances as a radio actor, fully exploiting the lower register of his voice to imbue his Moriarty with just the right amount of menace. His interplay with Gielgud is fast-paced and witty, easily establishing that these are two characters of equally phenomenal intelligence, but also painfully polite. The ambivalent tone of Welles and Gielgud's banter makes clear that their Holmes and Moriarty regard each other very highly, and are almost sorry to be stuck on a collision course.



John Gielgud as King Henry IV in Orson Welles's Chimes at Midnight (1966)

Both the Mercury and the BBC shows both contain a nearly identical scene in 221b Baker Street, drawn directly from Doyle's story, in which Holmes and Moriarty, each fingering a pistol in his pocket, have a polite conversation and decide that they can't go on long without killing each other. It's loaded with tension and is [one of the best scenes Doyle ever wrote](#), but it falls flat in the Mercury broadcast. Not only is Welles miscast as Holmes, his Moriarty (Eustace Wyatt) crosses too easily into the realm of a snarling Saturday matinee villain.

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/holmes3.mp3>

By contrast, Welles and Gielgud read their lines with a fair amount of humor, but their performances retain a high level of dramatic intensity. Their restraint makes the scene much more dramatic, and their chemistry, at least in these roles, is much stronger than Welles and Wyatt in the Mercury version.

<https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/holmes4.mp3>

Sherlock Holmes survived the fight at the Reichenbach Falls, of course; Professor Moriarty did not. Likewise, "The Final Problem" marked Orson Welles's last appearance in a radio drama. It was a fitting end not just for Moriarty but for the radio career of an actor and director who had done so much for the medium, and who owed at least some of his success to fiction's greatest detective: Sherlock Holmes.



Orson Welles as Cagliostro in Black Magic (1949)

A. Brad Schwartz co-wrote an episode of the award-winning PBS series *American Experience* on the *War of the Worlds* broadcast, based in part on research from his senior thesis at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. He is currently writing a book on Welles and *War of the Worlds* for Farrar, Straus & Giroux, to be published in 2015.

From **Mercury to Mars** is winding down it's long career on **Sounding Out!** Stay tuned for a few new posts from **Antenna**, as well as a special post by renowned film scholar Murray Pomerance on this site in the coming weeks to wrap things up.

New to the series? Check out some of the many places we've visited while chasing down radio's greatest magician.

- [Here](#) is "Hello Americans," **Tom McEnaney's** post on Welles and Latin America
- [Here](#) is **Eleanor Patterson's** post on editions of WOTW as "Residual Radio"
- [Here](#) is "Sound Bites," **Debra Rae Cohen's** post on Welles's "Dracula"
- [Here](#) is **Cynthia B. Meyers** on the pleasures and challenges of teaching WOTW in the classroom
- [Here](#) is **Kathleen Battles** on parodies of Welles by Fred Allen
- [Here](#) is **Shawn VanCour** on the second act of War of the Worlds
- [Here](#) is the navigator page for our **#WOTW75** collective listening project
- [Here](#) is **Josh Shepperd's** post, "War of the Worlds and the Invasion of Media Studies"
- [Here](#) is **Aaron Trammell's** remarkable mix of the thoughts of more than a dozen radio scholars on "War of the Worlds."
- [Here](#) is our podcast of **Monteith McCollum's** amazing WOTW remix
- [Here](#) is "Devil's Symphony," **Jacob Smith's** study of the "eco-sonic" Welles.
- [Here](#) is **Michele Hilmes's** post on the persistence and evolution of radio drama overseas after Welles.

Me? Why I'm your host, Neil Verma.