

Few characters in English fiction are as well known as the master detective Sherlock Holmes, who solves crimes by combining “the science of deduction” with his tremendous knowledge of many subjects. One of his least expected specialties is classical literature.

To understand Holmes, we must understand his creator, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Doyle’s official biographer, John Dickson Carr, demonstrated that Holmes was modelled after Doyle himself. Doyle was educated at the Jesuit college of Stonyhurst in Lancashire, where he studied Greek and Latin grammar, and read such authors as Homer and Sallust. Carr notes that Doyle was deeply impressed by Macaulay’s *Lays of Ancient Rome*, especially the tale of the Roman hero Horatius: one man fighting for the right, “facing fearful odds”. His fascination with this theme is reflected not only in the heroic knights of his medieval novel *The*

White Company, but also in Sherlock Holmes’ single-handed battle against the evil gang of Professor Moriarty.

Holmes first appears in *A Study in Scarlet*, where he shows a fondness for Latin by purchasing an old book entitled *De iure inter gentes*. In *The Empty House*, he disguises himself as a bookseller and tries to sell Dr. Watson a volume of Catullus. But Holmes is no mere book collector; he knows Latin texts by heart. *Scarlet* concludes with him quoting the miser’s apology from Horace’s first *Satire*: *Populus me sibilat, at mihi plaudo ipse domi simul ac nummos contemplor in arca* (“People hiss at me, but I congratulate myself at home when I think of the cash in my strongbox”). In *The Red-Headed League*, Holmes quotes a line from the *Agricola* of Tacitus, *omne ignotum pro magnifico* (“everything unknown is considered marvellous”), referring to people’s astonishment at his results. He also mentions, in chapter 2 of *Scarlet*, the propositions of the Greek mathematician Euclid. Another ancient source cited by Holmes is the Biblical story of Uriah and Bathsheba, which provides the key to the mystery of *The Crooked Man*.

In compiling his famous and naive document, “Sherlock Holmes – His Limits”, Watson claims “Knowledge of Literature – nil”, but this is incorrect. Apart from occasional quotations from Goethe and Flaubert, Holmes shows a knowledge of ancient and even medieval literature. In *A Case of Identity* he quotes a verse of Hafiz (a 14th-century Persian lyric poet) and remarks, “There is as much sense in Hafiz as in Horace.”

Holmes is not the only character in these stories who is interested in Classics. In *The Priory School*, the school’s principal has written a book, *Huxtable’s Sidelights on Horace*. In *The Three Students*, a slight passage from Thucydides provides the motive for the crime. Doyle is fond of giving his characters Greek and Roman names, such as Lysander Stark, Horace Harker and Charles Augustus Milverton, or Hebrew ones, like Enoch Drebbler and Jabez Wilson. To find *The Missing Three-Quarter*, Holmes employs a tracking dog named Pompey. Some of the settings of the stories also have classical names. *The Disappearance of Lady Carfax* takes Holmes and

Watson to the Rue de Trajan in Montpellier. In *The Greek Interpreter* we meet Holmes' reclusive brother Mycroft at the Diogenes Club, named after the fourth-century BC philosopher who founded the Cynic school.

Sherlock Holmes is influenced by classical mythology, too. "The fates are against you, Watson", he says in *The Reigate Puzzle*, while in *The Problem of Thor Bridge* he invokes the help of the god of justice. This god with a small "g" is surely not the Christian deity but Zeus Dikaios. Watson, the long-suffering narrator, himself makes use of classical allusions, describing a clever retort by Holmes as a "Parthian shot", and the foul smell of the Grimpen Mire in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* as a "miasmatic vapour" (Greek *miasma* = pollution, corruption).