Coding and Decoding in “The Red Circle”

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Like many of Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories, “The Red Circle” is a classic example of what Roland Barthes denominated the “hermeneutic” text, a narrative driven by the search for a solution to an enigma (19-20). Such a text, according to Peter Brooks, concerns “the questions and answers that structure a story: their suspense, partial unveiling, temporary blockage, and eventual resolution” (18). This careful plotting, he adds, is the dynamic aspect of narrative through which the text “unfurls before us a precipitation of shape and meaning” (35).

“The Red Circle” was published in two installments. In the first part, Holmes investigates a trifling domestic problem: the eccentric behavior of Mrs. Warren’s lodger. Clues left by this reclusive figure lead Holmes to deduce that the person occupying the room is a substitute for the man who rented it, that the new lodger is a woman of foreign origin, and that she will receive a coded communication from a “confederate.” When Holmes intercepts the message and deciphers the code, he realizes that Mrs. Warren’s problem assumes a “sinister aspect.” In the second part, which addresses the more serious complication presented by the case, Holmes and Watson hurry to the site from whence the code originated. There they are surprised to come upon Gregson of Scotland Yard and Leverton of Pinkerton’s Detective Agency, who are pursuing Gorgiano of the Red Circle. The four men enter the building together and discover a “grotesquely horrible” figure: the corpse of Gorgiano himself. While the officials wonder who the killer might be, Holmes replicates the code, summons the concealed lodger, and invites her story. Emilia’s lengthy account—of her marriage in Naples to Gennaro Lucca, of their flight to New York to escape the Red Circle, and of their subsequent flight to London to evade Gorgiano—convinces Holmes that Gennaro has justifiably killed his pursuer. The case closes when Gregson agrees that “this lady’s husband will receive a pretty general vote of thanks.”

One of the later adventures, in a highly formulaic series, “The Red Circle” is in several respects an atypical Sherlock Holmes story. First, unlike most of the cases, there is little
emphasis on Holmes’s singular powers of observation and deduction. At the outset, uncharacteristically, he resists Mrs. Warren’s plea for assistance and dismisses her uneasiness. And even when he agrees to take on the case, the enigma that he unravels is the lesser of the two “threads” leading to the “tangle.” The story centers not on Holmes’s investigation but on the double narrative: the two plots that coalesce in the pursuit of Gorgiano of the Red Circle. Second, in many of the cases, a significant clue or code stands as a metaphor for the investigation as a whole and tests Holmes’s methods of detection. One of the most celebrated examples is the string of conclusions that he deduces from a character’s hat. In “The Red Circle,” Holmes’s reading of the candle code leads to his realization that Mrs. Warren’s problem “opens a pleasing field for intelligent speculation.” But breaking this code requires no real expertise: Holmes himself admits to Watson that it is “not a very obscure cipher.” Third, as several scholars have remarked, the project of the Sherlock Holmes series is to maintain or restore the social order of the late Victorian era. The loci of anxiety in the stories are threats to middle-class morality, domesticity, respectability, and conventionality. In “The Red Circle,” however, the threat comes not from within but from abroad, and the disruption is not chiefly social but political. Fourth, into almost every story Doyle introduces a motif to establish an undertone or even to thematize the case. The repeated figure may be a pattern of images or references, like the comic allusions to birds in “The Blue Carbuncle” or the ominous reports of deaths in “The Speckled Band.” Embedded in “The Red Circle,” though, are no fewer than three binary systems: chaos vs. order, darkness vs. light, and small vs. great. These polarities stand as analogies to the code at the center of the story and to the figure in the title. Fifth, in many of the stories, Watson concerns himself to establish the temporal context of the case: the date when the client first approached Holmes; the number of days that passed during the course of the investigation; or even the span of time that has elapsed between the conclusion of the case and the present moment of narration. Of “The Red Circle,” however, Michael Hardwick observes correctly that “no date is given nor clearly deducible” but suggests incorrectly that the omission “is of no matter” (162). For the story resonates most powerfully for readers if the date of the action is understood to be simultaneous with the date of publication and if the tale is construed as grounded not in the scandals of the late Victorian era but in the emerging threats of the twentieth century. In this essay, I propose to read these five departures from the conventional patterns of the stories as strategies for decoding the “shape and meaning” of “The Red Circle.”

“Different threads, but leading up to the same tangle.”

4 The hermeneutic tensions between enigma and solution inscribe themselves powerfully in the Sherlock Holmes stories. As Rosemary Jann observes: “Such stories are governed by a paradoxical textual dynamics: they move toward solution but exist only so long as closure can be postponed” (22). In “The Red Circle” further tension arises between two enigmas—the identity of Mrs. Warren’s lodger and the pursuit of Gorgiano—that culminate in one resolution.

5 In his commentary on “The Red Circle,” Owen Dudley Edwards notes that the story was published in two parts “against Doyle’s wishes” (201). In retrospect the division is instructive, for the break articulates both the separation and the connection between the two investigations. It is significant that the first part ends at the point when Gennaro’s
message stops. Holmes has learned, by intercepting and decoding the candle flashes, that "there is some devilry going forward." And although he resolves to "define the situation a little more clearly," his investigation is now essentially concluded. It is also important, both spatially and temporally, that the second part begins with Watson glancing "back" at Mrs. Warren's top window and observing the shadow of her lodger "waiting with breathless suspense for the renewal of that interrupted message." For Watson's backward glance, in addition to uniting the two parts of the story, links as well the two investigations that have unfolded concurrently but which must be accounted for sequentially. When Holmes and Watson come upon Gregson and Leverton, the occasion presents itself for the narration of the second investigation: the search for Gorgiano. In a brief rehearsal—constructed as a conversation among Holmes, Gregson, and Leverton—Watson recounts the dramatic discovery of Gorgiano’s corpse and the process by which Holmes replicates the candle code and summons Emilia Lucca to the grisly site. The two "threads" of investigation have led "to the same tangle." And the remainder of the story, save for a short epilogue, is related entirely in Emilia’s “remarkable narrative.”

The “tangle” is the story of Gennaro and Emilia: their emigration from Naples, their new life together in New York, their pursuit by Gorgiano and the Red Circle, their flight to London, and their communication through the newspaper and by flashes of light. Holmes and Watson have been “taking the signals” meant for the lodger, while Gregson and Leverton have been “on the trail” of Gorgiano. The two threads of their concurrent investigations come together at the moment when Watson lights the “detective’s lantern” and illuminates “a dark figure on the floor”: the body of Gorgiano.

The conjoining of the two investigations parallels other narrative strategies of resolution in the story. It is curious, for example, that Holmes’s investigation pursues a lodger whose behavior has made a landlady uneasy, while the investigation conducted by the official forces pursues a thug with “dreadful powers.” Holmes works parallel to the official police, but he is oddly oblivious to the greater implications of the quarry they both pursue. As Edwards quips, “the story ultimately sidelines him” (xv). Also, because Emilia has related her account “in rapid and fluent but very unconventional English,” Watson translates her narrative “for the sake of clearness.” His “grammatical” rendering of her story echoes Holmes’s translations of the flashes into letters, letters into words in Italian, Italian into English. It is both surprising that the two investigations coalesce and satisfying that they achieve resolution in the words spoken by the lodger but translated by Watson. For the enigmas in the story are resolved less by Holmes’s powers of detection than by Watson’s powers of narration.

“And not a very obscure cipher, Watson.”

According to Brooks: “The clearest and purest example of the hermeneutic would no doubt be the detective story, in that everything in the story’s structure, and its temporality, depends on the resolution of enigma” (18). In addition to presenting itself as a study in narrative complexity, involving tensions between enigma and solution, “The Red Circle” also contains the hermeneutic task of deciphering a profusion of texts and signals.

Throughout the series, Sherlock Holmes is portrayed as a reader of innumerable texts: books, maps, codes, letters, receipts, indexes, newspapers, telegrams, registers, a ritual, a racing form, a gazetteer, and even these stories that Watson has fashioned from the cases.
In “The Red Circle” two important texts prefigure the code at the center of the case. The first is a string of “laconic messages,” printed on “slips of foolscape,” by which Holmes deduces that Mrs. Warren’s lodger is attempting to conceal her foreign identity. The second is “the great book in which, day by day, he filed the agony columns of the various London journals.” From the lodger’s request for the Daily Gazette, Holmes is led to peruse the paper’s advertisements for evidence of “any message to reach her from without.” And there he finds—among “a chorus of groans, cries, and bleatings”—the key to the signal message: “Remember code agreed—one A, two B, and so on.”

“The Red Circle” is not unlike an earlier Sherlock Holmes adventure, “The Dancing Men,” which also “contains the subsidiary hermeneutic task of interpreting cryptograms” (Fowler 156). In that story the cipher is a sequence of stick figures, and Holmes breaks the code by applying “the rules which guide us in all forms of secret writings.” When he uses the cipher to lure the sender of the messages, he explains that “what one man can invent another can discover.” This paradigm of coding and decoding is repeated in “The Red Circle” when Holmes uses the candle code to summon Emilia:

“It was I who called,” said Holmes.
“Your cipher was not difficult, madam. Your presence here was desirable. I knew that I had only to flash ‘Vieni’ and you would surely come.”

The candle code, sent as a series of flashes, is surprisingly unsophisticated. Holmes has told Watson that the cipher is not obscure, and here he reiterates that the cipher is not difficult. What purpose, then, is served by this decoding? To demonstrate Holmes’s skills of deciphering? Hardly. The flash code has been spelled out in the agony column, and reading the signals requires no great expertise. As Gennaro sends the flashes of light to Emilia, Holmes and Watson have only to intercept them, to count them, to substitute letters for their numerical counterparts, and to assemble them into words. Holmes has anticipated “that the affair will grow more intelligible,” and the simple act of translating “Attenta” and “Pericolo”—“Beware” and “Danger”—confirms that Mrs. Warren’s problem “takes on a sinister aspect.” It is significant that the deed by which the signals are “suddenly cut short,” the murder of Gorgiano, precipitates the conclusion of Holmes’s investigation. He has been “taking the signals,” and it is reasonable to regard the threat that they signify as an icon of the case as a whole.

In “The Dancing Men,” Alastair Fowler argues, “the anticlimactic structure obviates suspense, but allows the decipherment to become a retrospective microcosm of the investigation. . . . The coda of deciphering is like the explanatory recapitulation . . . that completes the classic detective story” (157). Similarly, at the conclusion of “The Red Circle” Holmes anticipates yet another text: “Well Watson, you have one more specimen of the tragic and grotesque to add to your collection.” His decoding of texts and signals, a metaphor for the process of detection, parallels the act of reading the story itself.

“Now that Gorgiano is dead we fear nothing.”

Many scholars now concur that there is an ideological undertext in the Sherlock Holmes series (Belsey 117; Fowler 168). Whether the emphasis falls upon purely intellectual deciphering or upon socially implicated detecting, the project of the stories is to preserve the social order of the late Victorian era. To this end, most of the early adventures
suggest that threats to this order can be contained and managed. But in “The Red Circle” the threat is political and its source is foreign.

14 Patrick Brantlinger observes that the perceived menace of the foreign—“the invasion of civilization by forces of barbarism”—was a prominent theme in English fiction at the turn of the twentieth century (230). In *A Study in Scarlet*, for example, Watson complains that the increasing flow of immigrants to London from the far reaches of the globe is turning the city—the center of British identity—into a “great cesspool.” Throughout the Sherlock Holmes stories foreigners are represented as intruders, and Holmes himself often serves as a mediator between English civility and the foreign elements that threaten English values.

15 In “The Red Circle” the three Italian characters are associated with disorder. Emilia responds without restraint to the sight of Gorgiano’s corpse, and Watson finds it “terrible and amazing to see such a woman so convulsed with joy.” Gennaro is a shadowy figure whose presence is indicated only in the signals that he sends “after dusk.” And Gorgiano is portrayed as “a savage,” “a devil and a monster,” “grotesque, gigantic, and terrifying.” As Jann remarks: “Foreigners are always treated as exotics by Doyle, as if to imply that the infection of British normalcy is more plausible when it comes from exposure to alien contagions” (76).

16 When the perpetrators of disruption are greedy or dissolute English men and women, the transgressions are generally local. But when the sources of danger are foreign, the threats tend to be magnified. The invasion of London by Emilia, Gennaro, and Gorgiano imperils the bourgeois stability symbolized by Mrs. Warren and her lodging house. Holmes’s minor role in resolving the case underscores the nation’s vulnerability to threats from foreign agents. He can decode the signals and the official forces can follow the trail, but Gennaro is the one who repulses the disorder imposed by Gorgiano. This resolution suggests that neither Holmes and Watson nor Gregson and Leverton can vanquish the foreign threat to British stability. Holmes notes that “although Holmes usually solves the mysteries surrounding secret societies and pacts, he is often too late to avert the deaths they instigate” (91). “Despite Holmes’s best efforts,” adds Martin Priestman, these failures occur most frequently when “the secret society featured is foreign” and when its members are “less predictable in their behavior and final treatment” (76). Priestman and Jann conclude, respectively, that “alien activities are no concern of British justice” (79) and that “exotic foreign conflicts are usually simply expelled from orderly England or adjudicated by a higher source of justice” (91). But the intrusion here of Gorgiano—a man of “exaggerated and monstrous” passions—represents a threat that defies law and faith. In this respect, “The Red Circle” complements another Holmes story, “Wisteria Lodge,” published thirty months earlier, in which “terrorism is exported to England” and “political assassination and intrigue infiltrate the English estate” (Kestner 170). Both texts anticipate “a horrifying cascade” of evils, according to Edwards, “in the face of which Sherlock Holmes can do little more than make an occasional difference” (xii).

“That black cloud appeared which was soon to overspread our sky.”

17 In a story that presents itself as a unity of complexities, deciphering the several layers of coding in “The Red Circle” compels the reader to unpack, in turn, three parallel motifs:
wresting order from chaos, extracting light from darkness, and deducing great things from small ones. Doyle threads these binaries through the first part of the story.

18 The case begins by iterating a well-established project of the Sherlock Holmes series: the triumph of order over disorder. Mrs. Warren interrupts Holmes as he is “arranging and indexing some of his recent material.” But she justifies her intrusion by recalling that he had successfully “arranged an affair” for one of her former lodgers. This emphasis on Holmes’s ordering skills anticipates his processes of sorting and deciphering evidence. For the key to the case is revealed in the scrapbook in which he has meticulously filed the agony columns of the daily papers. From a chaotic “rag-bag of singular happenings,” Holmes selects the sequence of notices that leads to the cipher. “We know the code,” he says to Watson, “so surely our task should be simple.”

19 At the start of the story, moreover, Holmes tells Mrs. Warren that he “cannot see” the reason for her alarm. “You are uneasy, as I understand, because your new lodger remains in his rooms and you cannot see him.” The repetition of the words “cannot see” is countered by Mrs. Warren’s report of Holmes’s success in a case involving a former lodger: “He would never cease talking of the way in which you brought light into the darkness.” Later, when Mrs. Warren’s husband is abducted, Holmes’s curiosity rises. He warns the frightened woman: “Do nothing rash. I begin to think that this affair may be very much more important than appeared at first sight. It is clear now that some danger is threatening your lodger. It is equally clear that his enemies, lying in wait for him near your door, mistook your husband for him in the foggy morning light.” This oscillation between illumination and obscurity anticipates the circumstances under which Holmes will observe the candle flashes.

20 When he agrees to take up Mrs. Warren’s case, Holmes tells her: “I must understand every detail. The smallest point may be the most essential.” This tension between the small and the great establishes a pattern sustained throughout the first part of the story. Mrs. Warren herself has collected a handful of clues, she tells Holmes, “because I had heard that you can read great things out of small ones.” And indeed Holmes reads the lodger’s printed communications as “laconic messages” that offer “a pleasing field for intelligent speculation.” He speculates that the unfolding case may be either “trivial” or “much deeper than appears on the surface,” and when he learns that Mrs. Warren’s husband has been assaulted he realizes that her “whimsical problem enlarges.” “This affair,” Holmes acknowledges, “may be very much more important than appeared at first sight.”

21 These triple polarities stand as self-reflexive analogies to the code at the center of the story and to the figure in the title. Although cracking the candle code presents no challenge for Sherlock Holmes, the circumstances under which he reads it are instructive. “As we peered from the darkened sitting-room of the lodging-house,” Watson recalls, “one more dim light glimmered high up through the obscurity.” Through “the gloom of a London winter evening,” he and Holmes observe the flashes of light and read Gennaro’s “urgent message.” Suddenly, the signals assume a grave significance. Ordered, clarified, and enlarged, the code anticipates the threat that lies at the heart of the case.

22 Like the triple binaries that shape the first part of the story, the eponymous red circle operates on three levels. First, it is the name of the Neapolitan society that Gennaro had joined in “his wild and fiery days.” Second, it is both the mark upon the summons that Gennaro received, ordering his presence at a lodge, and the “fatal disc” upon the lot that he drew, ordering him to murder his benefactor. And, third, it is the sign of violence
visited by Gennaro upon Gorgiano himself, who is discovered lying “encircled by a ghastly crimson halo of blood.” Emilia reveals that “the oaths and secrets of this brotherhood were frightful” and describes the “dreadful society” as one from which “no escape was possible.” She tells Holmes that Gorgiano “had earned the name of ‘Death’ in the South of Italy,” and Leverton confirms that Gorgiano is “at the bottom of fifty murders” in America.

In her account of Gorgiano’s pursuit, Emilia recalls the terror she felt at the moment “when that black cloud appeared which was soon to overspread our sky.” Here, in a text so heavily laden with figures of speech, the reader discerns an analogy between the threat posed by Gorgiano and some even greater menace. Coded in the margins of the story, Edwards suggests, are “phenomena betokening the advent of world cataclysm” (xii).

“This is an instructive case.”

In the penultimate story in the Sherlock Holmes series, “The Veiled Lodger,” Watson describes the archives of the great detective’s cases as “a perfect quarry for the student not only of crime, but of the social and official scandals of the late Victorian era.” His survey is accurate for most of Holmes’s cases. The disorder foregrounded in “The Red Circle,” however, is neither scandalous nor Victorian. The story was first collected—in *His Last Bow*—among other stories published between 1908 and 1917 that “reflect a wider and increasingly less contained and ordered world” and that stand as “milestones for a world on its way to war” (Edwards xii). “The Red Circle” is best construed as an episode of the rising tide of ethnic violence of foreign origin common in the early years of the twentieth century.

According to Brooks, reading a hermeneutic text results in the creation of a “space of suspense” that “we work through toward what is felt to be, in classical narrative, the revelation of meaning” (18). But what meaning is revealed in “The Red Circle”? Near the end of the story’s first part, as Holmes’s investigation draws to a close, Watson poses a variation of the same question: “What is at the root of it?” And Holmes explains, obliquely, that he expects nothing from his involvement but the pleasure of “studying”:

“Education never ends, Watson. It is a series of lessons with the greatest for the last. This is an instructive case.”

A parallel passage occurs at the conclusion of the second part, when Gregson reflects: “What I can’t make head or tail of, Mr. Holmes, is how on earth you got yourself mixed up in the matter.” And Holmes replies: “Education, Gregson, education. Still seeking knowledge at the old university.”

What is “at the root” of this case? And what is “instructive” about it? The force of the repeated questions and responses confirms Brooks’s assertion—quoted at the start of this essay—that artful plotting in the hermeneutic text “moves us forward as readers” toward a disclosure of the story’s “meaning.” Although that meaning is never made explicit, it must reside in the objects of the two investigations: the source of the signals (Gennaro) and the source of the mayhem (Gorgiano), both of whom are members of the Red Circle. Emilia in her narrative recites a roll of the society’s activities: blackmail, vengeance, extortion, intimidation, murder. “It was part of their fiendish system,” she explains, “to punish those whom they feared or hated by injuring not only their own persons, but those whom they loved, and it was the knowledge of this which hung as a terror over my
poor Gennaro's head and drove him nearly crazy with apprehension." Ultimately, the red circle of the title must be construed as an emblem and locus of ethnic violence.

Jann observes that "the Sherlock Holmes stories for the most part do not focus on what were perceived at the time as the most serious threats to social order in later Victorian and Edwardian society. We catch no glimpses . . . of the anarchists and other terrorists who disturbed the peace . . . for political reasons" (72). But in "The Red Circle" Arthur Conan Doyle directs new "light into the darkness" of human affairs. Edwards remarks that this case is noteworthy for its "awareness of the social, national, and spiritual tensions inherent in ethnic networks" and asserts that, among Sherlock Holmes's adventures, "this story is the clearest milestone of all on the road to world war" (xxvi). First published in 1911, "The Red Circle" codes the ethnic violence that littered the global landscape in the first decades of the twentieth century and that persists to the present day.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


ABSTRACTS

" Le cercle rouge " fait partie de cette dernière série d'histoires de Sherlock Holmes, toutes écrites selon la même formule. Le présent article propose de montrer qu'il s'agit néanmoins d'une histoire atypique, à plusieurs égards. La stratégie particulière qui se met en œuvre pour décoder la forme et la signification de l'affaire criminelle décrite éclaire des écarts révélateurs par rapport aux modèles conventionnels : La violence du texte laisse une trace plus profonde que
le raisonnement qu’il met en œuvre pour la découverte du criminel. Le mystère est résolu par un processus narratif plutôt que par un travail de lecture participative. Enfin, c’est une intrusion étrangère plutôt que le désordre domestique qui délimite le récit. Avec cette histoire Arthur Conan Doyle cherche probablement à jeter une nouvelle “lumière dans l’obscurité” des rapports humains. Publié en 1911, “Le cercle rouge” semble éclairer la route sinistre sur laquelle s’engagent les Nations à l’orée de la Première guerre mondiale en préfigurant ainsi la violence qui les conduisit à souiller le paysage de l’histoire récente.

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