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The Cry from the T/Womb: Gender roles and aspects of psychological domination in Edgar Allan Poe’s “Berenice”

Edgar Allan Poe claimed in *The Philosophy of Composition* that “[t]he death […] of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world” (Poe 816); a statement which has invited much criticism on the feminist side, that of Elisabeth Bronfen among many others, who calls on Freud, Lacan and Kristeva to make her point generated by the above proposition. Attempting to dive beneath the surface of this sentence, Bronfen assumes that a dead feminine body as the object of gazing or scrutiny necessarily presupposes a gazer/spectator that is essentially alive and masculine (64–65). This way the figure of the dead woman functions as a shield between the speaking or seeing subject and the unutterable force of death. A corpse ensures and reassures the survival of the speaker/spectator at the very sight of the death of another, simply because it is not the subject who is dying or is already dead. Death as the castrator of life penetrates the body of the culturally Other, at the same time leaving the Self intact, whole, impenetrable.

The question arises how the binaries of inanimate–animate, penetrable–impenetrable, feminine–masculine, female–male works on the level of representation in Poe’s work. I have selected one story, “Berenice”, to analyse these dichotomies. In its analysis, I use both versions of the story; most of the quotations are from the 1845 version; however, at certain points it is necessary to consult the original text, which was published in 1835 in the *Southern Literary Messenger*. Approaching this story from a feminist and psychoanalytical point of view is not unprecedented in literary criticism. The first who did so was Marie Bonaparte, who in her influential study, *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Psycho-Analytic Interpretation* (1933), applied the concept of the ‘vagina dentata’ to Poe’s “Berenice”, and read the story as one about the sexual frustration of an impotent man. Karen Weeke’s reading offers further insight into the character of Berenice; she claims that Poe did not portray flesh and blood women in his stories, instead he reduced them to mere concepts such as mortality or the emerging New Woman (150–156). Joan Dayan, in one of her essays on Poe’s work, “Amorous Bondage: Poe, Ladies and Slaves”, identified the master–slave relationship in male–female relationships in Poe’s tales on women. Taking these studies as the basis of the argument, the present paper aims at expanding the findings concerning the death of a beautiful
The see-saw-effect

“Berenice” of all Poe’s stories is probably the most outstanding representation of gender shift/ambivalence, power envy and vampirism, telling about the obscure and one might say perverse relationship of two cousins; a curious relation that functions as a see-saw at the two poles of which stand Egaeus and Berenice representing the male and the female end, respectively. I refuse to call these two poles masculine and feminine since gender appears to shift from one point to the other as the narrative progresses. The fact that the story is being told from the perspective of Egaeus, establishing the speaker/spectator/gazer as male, might lure us into the false supposition that he is the authoritative figure of the following pages. However, the name of the speaker seems to be a crucial point considering the outcome of the story and, as Joan Dayan argues, “Poe’s names […] are never arbitrary” (Fables 138). When setting up a list of possible origins for the teeth-theme, she recalls Catullus’s poem about Egnatius – the name obviously bearing some resemblance to that of our “hero” – who had such white teeth that he just smiled and smiled no matter when or where (Fables 138). Nevertheless, we soon come to understand that the male in Poe’s story cannot boast such ‘accessories’ as opposed to the female whose teeth will emerge as central to the gender shift.

The absence of those shining white teeth that poetic tradition prefigures in the mouth of Egaeus, which are found in the mouth of Berenice instead, signifies the ambiguity of power...
and gender relations. Others interpret Egaeus’s name differently, connecting it to other literary sources: Michael J. S. Williams indicates a conspicuous similarity between the name of Egaeus and Egeus, Hermia’s father in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and Aegeus, Theseus’s father. This similarity leads Williams to assume that Poe’s narrator is involved in a “quest for becoming the father” (171) and that his attempt seems futile at the beginning of the story since “his ‘noon of mankind’ still finds him in ‘the mansion of [his fathers]’” (171). Egaeus’s inability to assume to role of the father might be traced back to the same anxiety that results from his lack of the teeth, where ‘father’ and ‘teeth’ are metaphors for power, superiority, and domination.

The assumption seems substantiated when the narrator begins to describe the place he is entitled to dominate – surprisingly not the conventional outdoor sphere where masculine energies are allowed the freedom to be drained in activity and transformed into the fruit of certain energy-taxing adventures – but the enclosed territory of his family mansion:

> My baptismal name is Egaeus; that of my family I will not mention. Yet there are no towers in the land more time-honored than my gloomy, gray, hereditary halls. Our line has been called a race of visionaries; and in many striking particulars – in the character of the family mansion – in the frescos of the chief saloon – in the tapestries of the dormitories – in the chiselling of some buttresses in the armory – but more especially in the gallery of antique paintings – in the fashion of the library chamber – and, lastly, in the very peculiar nature of the library's contents – there is more than sufficient evidence to warrant the belief. (Poe 313)

The description of his paternal halls is highly gendered; with phallic towers and a strong relation to history, implying that its ownership has passed from father to son; nevertheless, Egaeus is confined to a particular sphere within the mansion; the library chamber. Apart from the fact that room interiors, in general, evoke a suffocating feminine atmosphere with their frescoes, paintings, and tapestries, the library is explicitly connected to the memory of the mother: “The recollections of my earliest years are connected with that chamber, and with its volumes – of which latter I will say no more. Here died my mother. Herein was I born” (313). The liberating effect of birth has seemingly not burst through the walls of home and he continues to live in the extended womb of his mother, having been unable to sever himself from the maternal body. According to Marie Bonaparte, whose ground-breaking psychoanalytic study of Poe’s tales unclosed new directions for Poe-scholarship; characters’
imprisonment in small spaces engenders the possibility to act out “womb-fantasies” (qtd. in Symons 228). Although today some of Bonaparte’s ideas may sound outdated, since she analyses Poe’s works in terms of his childhood traumas (i.e. the death of his mother and the departure of his father, Symons 227); it is certainly compelling to interpret Egaeus’s sphere as feminine, not only because he continues to live in a room associated with the dead mother, but also for his lack of action, his quiet contemplation within a domestic space. The fact that he has been born into the chamber, reduces him to the dependent state of a victim (not to say, a slave), who has had no choice whatsoever, but to endure under the dominance of the mother.

Another interesting aspect of his enslavement to the maternal body is yet another absence: that of a proper name. The lack of a proper name is a device Poe consistently uses with female characters such as Berenice, Morella, Ligeia, Eleanor, thus stripping them of every social or familial relation, reducing them to a female principle that defies any categorization, contextualization or signification. Egaeus’s paternal halls do place him into adequate social relations and his abandonment of a proper name is unquestionably intentional (“that of my family I will not mention” 313), yet he does not seem to be willing to take the initiative just then, that is to step out into the world of signification, to sever himself from the maternal body. His hesitation might be the result of some oppressive force that keeps him groping in the dark; in shadows he is not capable of “getting rid of” (314) until the sunlight of his reason enlightens him. The ambition is already there, yet he still wants a phallus that would accelerate his transition from the feminine into the masculine.

The oppressive force that thwarts Egaeus soon rears its head as the narrator turns to his cousin, Berenice who possesses the very masculine energy that her male counterpart sadly lacks. The ubiquitous contradiction in their qualities and temperament erases every question concerning the place of the masculine on the see-saw:

Berenice and I were cousins, and we grew up together in my paternal halls. Yet differently we grew – I, ill of health, and buried in gloom – she, agile, graceful, and overflowing with energy; hers, the ramble on the hill-side – mine the studies of the cloister; I, living within my own heart, and addicted, body and soul, to the most intense and painful meditation – she, roaming carelessly through life, with no thought of the shadows in her path, or the silent flight of the raven-winged hours (314).

The pure light of the sylph-like Berenice, addressed as a goddess by Egaeus, blots out the flickering ambition of the man – she is the oppressor, the authority and he is subordinated to
the masculine power of the woman. Female authority doubtless springs from the woman’s ability to transcend time: she takes no heed of the passing time, the impending death that threatens Egaeus. Daniel Hoffman in his essay “Poe’s Obsessive Themes” indicates three major sources of terror in Edgar Poe’s short fiction: attaining forbidden knowledge that leads to destruction, the death of a beautiful woman, and thirdly, premature burial (Hoffman 105–106). According to Hoffman, all these themes are to express the speaking subject’s terror when facing time/death: an idea that is fully realised in “The Pit and the Pendulum”, where the narrator’s life is almost terminated by Time, that is the pendulum of a clock (105–106). Therefore, we might assume that the painful meditation of Poe’s narrator in “Berenice” is related to his craving for an avoidance of death, a desire that shows fulfilment in the woman’s careless attitude towards the passing of time.

Apart from lack of movement and action, Egaeus is characterized by other feminine traits. His being “ill of health” directly corresponds to the feminine ideal of nineteenth-century patriarchal society, when the pale and passive woman was put on the pedestal, whereas the energetic and active female was eyed with suspicion. Albeit writing about fin-de-siecle representations of the evil woman, Bram Dijkstra’s observations are very helpful. He states that “[f]or many a Victorian husband his wife’s physical weakness came to be evidence to the world and to God of her physical and mental purity” and that “‘unusual’ physical vigor in women” was associated with “dangerous, masculinizing attitudes” (25). The figure of the rambling and roaming Berenice, therefore, raises suspicion, being too masculine according to accepted gender norms. As George Fitzhugh wrote in 1850 in what would become part of his Sociology for the South: “Man loves his children because they are weak, helpless and dependent. He loves his wife for similar reasons. […] He ceases to love his wife when she becomes masculine and rebellious” (qtd. in Dayan, “Amorous Bondage” 241). This short extract does tell a lot about social requirements in nineteenth-century America, where women were seen as not entirely different from slaves: their submission to the masters of the house, meaning their husbands, is engendered by their weakness and helplessness, the absence of masculine energies and male initiative. The fact that Egaeus is apparently “entombed” in a “cloister” intensifies his image as one confined in a domestic space that naturally belongs to women: the nineteenth-century American woman’s lot did not differ much from her British sisters, meaning that her foremost responsibility was to perform domestic duties (Green 27–28).
Egaeus’s femininity is further stressed by his being associated with the element of earth. Dayan notices that the word ‘buried’ occurs in the text mostly in relation to Egaeus, who, in the above paragraph, is “buried in gloom”, otherwise buried in meditation or in his chamber (Fables 151–152). Burying immediately conjures up earthy images, where earth is the “female principle” (Belton 10), which “as source of life was gradually replaced by the exclusive fertilizing power of the male principle, rain or semen […] and became associated only with death” (Belton 10). As Robert J. Belton claims, “[t]he mouth of the earth was thus equated with the grave, while the mouth of the womb, the vagina took on a similar deathly symbolism. Both were perceived as insatiable devourers of men” (10). Egaeus is already engulfed by the maternal womb when he remains buried in his chamber, and he perceives Berenice as a further threat because he associates her with the phallic mother. In the next section, Berenice as phallic woman will be analysed in more detail.

Soon after the introduction of Berenice, the narrative proceeds to a description of a gradual shift in power relations: while he “gazed upon her” (314) a disease attacks Berenice which generates changes in the beholder as well. It is important to note that the tradition of the evil male gaze must have come down to Poe through his connection with the literary Gothic. Benjamin Franklin Fisher briefly engages with this feature in his essay, “Poe and the Gothic Tradition”, where he claims that the piercing eye of the Gothic villain “functions symbolically in phallic terms in its ability to penetrate its victims’ innermost secrets” (76), and he links the erotic male gaze with the “Evil Eye in folklore, which has powerfully magic and hypnotic effects” (76). Another implication of the man’s hypnotic gaze is also notable: hypnotism being an “occult practice associated with vampiric seduction” (Hurley 20). Egaeus’s masculine gaze directs our attention to certain vampiric traits in his character, which will be discussed in the third section of the paper in more detail.

The resulting power shift resembles the motion of the see-saw; so far Berenice has been up, that is in the authoritative position, now her energies begin to fade, her body starts to deteriorate until she is no more than a “vacillating and indistinct outline” (317), a shadow of her previous self. Before the disease attacked her, Berenice’s figure had been associated with light, the power of the masculine sun, whereas now she inhabits the world of shadows, the previous dwelling place of Egaeus, whose own illness, his monomania “gains vigor and ascendancy”, while Berenice “undergoes periodic trance, an epileptic descent into dissolution” (Dayan, Fables 141–142). The uncanny simultaneity of male ascent and female...
descent raises Egaeus from the feminine position of the Other, while the very same force thrusts Berenice into her “proper place” as a woman. The erotic male gaze that seeks to penetrate the woman’s body causes the female dissolution and descent initially; however, Berenice’s final capitulation is brought about by depriving her of the female phallus which manifests itself in the form of thirty-two starry white teeth.

**The teeth of the lion(ess)**

The teeth! - the teeth! - they were here, and there, and everywhere, and visibly and palpably before me; long, narrow, and excessively white, with the pale lips writhing about them, as in the very moment of their first terrible development. (317)

As indicated in the previous section, Berenice is perceived by her cousin as a phallic woman. It does not only mean, though, that Egaeus projects his fear of engulfment in the mother’s womb onto Berenice, but also that from a patriarchal perspective she does not fit the requirements of the feminine ideal. Egaeus’s description of Berenice is juxtaposed to that of his own, though in a slightly ambivalent way: while he is “ill of health”, buried in his chamber, confined to the domestic sphere, Berenice is depicted as inhabiting out-door places, full of energy and health. Her health seems to consist of a wholeness of being: apart from the before-mentioned masculine traits in her character, she is graceful and compared to the naiads. Interestingly, while Egaeus belongs to the maternal earth, Berenice’s natural element is water (the naiads’ fountains), which emphasizes her femininity besides her apparent masculinity. Her description is made up of both feminine and masculine characteristics, which renders her an androgyne. The “light-heartedness and joy” (314) of her early days derive from Berenice’s androgynous existence, which both she and her cousin experience as a wholeness of being that makes her impervious to physical or mental disease. In this respect, the young Berenice might be the literary forerunner of Emily Bronte’s tom-boy, Catherine Earnshaw of *Wuthering Heights*. Gilbert and Gubar call her a “perfect androgyne” (265) in her unity with Heathcliff; he is the whip that Catherine asked for when her father went to Liverpool, and her “longing for a whip seems like a powerless young daughter’s yearning for power” (Gilbert
and Gubar 264). Her “fullness of being” (265), as Gilbert and Gubar calls it, has been achieved by attaining possession of a phallus, Heathcliff, which relationship enables her to run barefoot on the moors without receiving any injury and ensures her mental health at the same time. Just like Catherine, Berenice also possesses something that conditions her physical and mental happiness: her teeth.

Berenice’s “smile of peculiar meaning” (317) might be interpreted in different ways: on the one hand, her “snarl” might be seen as a desperate attempt to reverse the dynamics of the changing power structure, that is to re-establish herself in the dominating position and deflate the man’s erect penis by evoking fear. On the other hand, the movement of the lips might be beheld from Egaeus’s perspective as a moment of epiphany: his realization of the means of winning the battle of sexes, his ultimate and most destructive weapon against the phallic woman. No doubt his obsession is concentrated on the teeth/the phallus of Berenice; through severing them from the woman’s body and attaining possession of them paves his way into the masculine. His longing is expressed in terms of sexual desire:

Then came the full fury of my monomania, and I struggled in vain against its strange and irresistible influence. In the multiplied objects of the external world I had no thoughts but for the teeth. For these I longed with a phrenzied desire. All other matters and all different interests became absorbed in their single contemplation. They – they alone were present to the mental eye, and they, in their sole individuality, became the essence of my mental life. I held them in every light. I turned them in every attitude. I surveyed their characteristics. I dwelt upon their peculiarities. I pondered upon their conformation. I mused upon the alteration in their nature. I shuddered as I assigned to them in imagination a sensitive and sentient power, and even when unassisted by the lips, a capability of moral expression (317).

The power he assigns to the teeth is the one he has been longing for all along, he believes his possession of them can “restore [him] to […] reason” (318), where the light of reason must be taken as the usurped place of Berenice. Joan Dayan contemplates the significance of the teeth along similar lines when she asserts that the compound ‘identity’ (identité in French) is made up of dents and idées referring to Egaeus’s intellectual monomania/obsession with teeth (Dayan, Fables 142), thus relating dental possession to building up and securing an appropriate identity. J. Gerald Kennedy appropriates Becker’s notion of the ‘transference
object’ “which for the child represents all that is frightening and uncontrollable in the world” (79–80). In Kennedy’s interpretation Berenice’s teeth stand for the transference object and Egaeus’s possessing them marks the “taming of [his] terror” (80).

Equating certain female body parts with the phallus does not go without precedence in Poe’s short fiction. In *Ligeia* we find the same subordination of male to female where the underlying motif of male dependency on a powerful woman is embodied in the narrator’s fascination with Ligeia’s eyes. The eye as phallus and the fear of losing one’s eyesight prefiguring the castration anxiety is deeply rooted in nineteenth–century literature: Freud in his essay on *The Uncanny*, discusses E.T.A. Hoffmann’s *The Sandman* in precisely these terms, where the narrator’s childhood fantasy of the sandman stealing his eyeballs reenacts itself in his adult impotence when he owes unnatural affection for a wax-doll. Freud’s argument about *scopophilia* is a case in point, according to which seeing is “preparatory to the sexual activity of touching the other body” (Bronfen 102). I have already referred to Fisher’s claim that eye of the Gothic villain is a phallic symbol as it seeks to penetrate the Other’s body and mind, where the Other of the villain in gothic fiction is almost always female. Eszter Muskovits in her discussion of womanhood in Stoker’s *Dracula* explains that in vampire tales the teeth are metaphors for the phallus. She interprets the act of bloodsucking as a sexual act, in which “[a] penetrating and a receiving organ play part” and “during which bodily fluids intermingle” (8).

If we are inclined to accept the teeth as symbols of the phallus and as such embodiments of masculine energy, it is easy to apply German psychoanalyst Karen Horney’s theory of power envy to the fight going on between Egaeus and Berenice. Horney draws on Freud’s theory of penis envy, which she criticizes in her *New Ways in Psychoanalysis*. Penis envy is attributed to girls at a certain stage of their psychosexual development when they realize their lack of a penis, which realization is inevitable for the development of gender and the sexual identity of women (Horney 101). According to Freud’s theory, girls react to this discovery with the wish to possess a penis, too, and “with an envy of those more fortunate beings” (Horney 101) who have one. In Horney’s view, however, this theory is rather limiting; she argues that “[i]t would require tremendous evidence to make it plausible that woman, physically built for specifically female functions, should be psychically determined by a wish for attributes of the other sex” (104). Instead of penis envy, she identifies woman’s wish to be a man as a “screen for repressed ambition” (109) and she also claims that this repressed
ambition might be true for men as well (109). As it is, in Poe’s tale we encounter a formulation of male desire to possess the female teeth, hence Horney’s argument is a case in point. Elisabeth Janeway arrives at a conclusion similar to Horney’s in her criticism of Freud’s theory of penis envy; as she says, “[n]o woman has been deprived of a penis; she never had one to begin with” (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar, 272). Instead “she has been deprived of something else that men enjoy: namely, autonomy, freedom, and the power to control her destiny” (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 272). Thus, the removal of Berenice’s teeth signifies Egaeus’s victory in the power struggle by castrating the female and reapplying her phallus (that is her power, freedom, and autonomy) to his own use. To define the relation of the two as a battle seems to be justified by the assumption that Berenice’s name in Greek means ‘bringer of victory’ which is by no means accidental, as Dayan also points out that names in Poe’s works bear great significance (Fables 138). Poe’s Berenice might also be related to the historical Berenice, wife of Ptolemy, King of Egypt, whose myth is centred around a lock of her hair she promised to Aphrodite, if her husband returned safely from the wars (Dayan, Fables 138–189). As Dayan notes, “this Ur-Berenice undergoes a metaphoric defloration as a prelude to reunion” (139) and the taking of the teeth in Poe’s tale serves as “an occasion for the restoration of peace and reunion with the lady” (153). I do not agree with Dayan at this point: considering Egaeus’s repressed anxiety and his desire to possess the phallus that leads him to violate the woman’s body, it sounds implausible that he should seek a reunion with Berenice. Instead, he searches for a way to become the oppressor from the oppressed, his emergence to the surface from his previous buried condition is only possible through burying Berenice, which he eventually does. He needs to take control of the woman, and he does so by extending his dominion over her teeth.

Another interpretation of the teeth-theme is offered by Marie Bonaparte who applies the idea of *vagina dentata* in her reading of the story. The term meaning ‘toothed vagina’ crops up in various mythologies of South American peoples; members of the Yanomamö tribe, for instance, employ the same word for ‘eating’ and ‘copulating’, while the early Jews spoke of the vagina as ‘beth shenayim’ meaning ‘toothed place’ and medieval Christianism had a tendency to equate the female genitalia with the ‘yawning mouth of hell’. Bonaparte argues that “teeth are dreadful because they are thought to be sited in the vagina, it being a frequent unconscious belief of the impotent that the vagina is furnished with teeth that can bite and

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2 <http://www.rotten.com/library/sex/vagina-dentata>
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castrate” (quoted in Symons 228). Bearing this in mind, the castration of Berenice’s toothed vagina points to Egaeus’s ultimate violation of the female body; pulling out the teeth from the woman’s mouth implies the pulling down of the last barriers that separated and defended the integrity, unity, wholeness of the woman’s body: the violation of Berenice’s tomb comes to be clarified as the violation of her armoured sexual domain. Though before her premature burial she resembles a living corpse, indicating the breaking up of her once healthy body, Berenice has some defences against the intruder: her body is lying “outstretched in the dark coffin” covered in a shroud, but she still has teeth.

Egaeus does not seem to be able to recollect what he has committed in the tomb, only “the shrill and piercing shriek of a female voice” (318) keeps ringing in his ears, a shriek which might be interpreted as the sound of female orgasm, substantiating the idea that he eventually ravishes the woman’s body via extracting her teeth. Egaeus’s masculine sexuality has thus reached full maturity; he is in absolute possession of the phallus and is ready to use it for sexual purposes. Joel Porte interprets the man’s “removing the sexual threat and thereby relieving his anxiety” as an “expression of sexuality” (qtd. in Dayan, Fables 143), after satisfying his sexual desire, he is still erect: “Why then, as I perused them, did the hairs of my head erect themselves on end, and the blood of my body become congealed within my veins?” (Poe 318, emphasis added).

Horney’s and Bonaparte’s ideas, therefore, contribute to two seemingly distinct readings of the teeth-theme. The theory of power-envy might help us in our understanding Egaeus’s desire to possess the phallus, the fulfillment of which enables him to acquire the knowledge that is necessary for his survival, whereas Bonaparte’s concept of the vagina dentata serves to highlight Egaeus’s dread of dangerous female sexuality. Interestingly, these two sets of notions meet in Bronfen’s discussion of the fetish. Bronfen explains fetishism in Freudian terms, where the fetish is a “token of triumph over the threat of castration”, a “safeguard against [death]” (97). However, in her study, Bronfen intends to analyse the proximity between death and femininity in literature and art; therefore, for her “fetishism can serve as a strategy to occult death and female sexuality simultaneously” (96).

In the first section of this paper, I pointed out that Egaeus’s subordination and melancholia are closely related to his inability to transcend time: his painful meditation about mortality is

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3 Egaeus’s visit to the tomb of Berenice is described in the original, 1835 version of the story. The four paragraphs that relate this visit are omitted in the later version.
4 The 1835 text is cited from the following source: <http://www.eapoe.org/works/tales/bernicea.htm#fn33401>
juxtaposed to Berenice’s carelessness about the “silent flight of the raven-winged hours” (Poe 314). As it is, Egaeus’s obsession with Berenice’s teeth might be interpreted as a fetishistic fantasy, the realization of which leads him to maintain his masculine identity against two threats: the threat posed by death as castrator of life and the threat posed by the sexual female as castrator of his masculinity. With the teeth in Egaeus’s possession, Berenice’s castration is doublefold: she is buried instead of the man, which implies that the woman is reduced to death, and at the same time she is castrated as a phallic woman, meaning that she is deprived of her masculinity. Either way, Berenice is sentenced to death: literally, because she is put into a coffin, or metaphorically, because she is forced to act out the role of the proper woman and be buried in the domestic space for good.

Judith Fryer argues that there is an “insatiable quest” in Poe’s men for knowledge – in this case sexual knowledge – which is equivalent to “fatal possession” (Fryer 42) – of the phallus and the female body – where the term possession might also refer to his being obsessed with quenching his sexual thirst. Thirst, sexual desire and the violation of barriers: this triad is associated with the infamous figure of the vampire; only one question remains: is it a male or female vampire who feeds upon its prey?

(D)raining blood – the male and female vampire

In nineteenth-century gothic, the figure of the vampire emerged as a symbol of power and sexuality. Poe’s characters, though never openly described as vampires, are (un)natural forerunners of Stoker’s Dracula and Le Fanu’s Carmilla in a tradition where illnesses, the draining of vital energies are associated with social and sexual repression, exploitation. Nevertheless, Poe’s treatment of the female vampire is quite peculiar if we consider that his female vampire preys on men. Ever since Polidori’s vampyre, Lord Ruthven and Stoker’s much later creation of Count Dracula, male vampires dominate the scene with victimized women falling prey to these predators and, though female vampires, like Geraldine in Coleridge’s “Christabel” and Sheridan Le Fanu’s Carmilla also gained ground they never chose victims from the opposite sex. Hence, the figure of the vampire is essentially masculine with its penetrating phallus, the teeth and its ability to reduce the Other (who is always female) to an emaciated and eventually dead form by sucking away her life energies. Yet Poe
chose to introduce a woman instead, Berenice, who possesses the capacity to victimize a man. In this respect, her character is a literary descendant of Keats’s “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”, a relatively early representation of the fallen woman, who, by means of her excessive sexuality, destroys generations of men. Both belong to the category of the “Temptress”, set up by Judith Fryer, who is “deadly because of her alluring yet frightening sexuality, which threatens to destroy the self-reliant hero. Her tragedy is inherent in her posture of defiance to societal mores” (Fryer 24).

The concepts of the female vampire and the fallen woman share some important characteristics: neither fits the feminine ideal of patriarchal societies and both defy the social and sexual norms that men prescribe to them. One aspect of this defiance is their use of sexuality for its own sake, and not for reproduction. As Josiah Gilbert Holland wrote, in the nineteenth century “motherhood was the role towards which a woman’s life was directed” (qtd. in Green 29), and as such, the woman who “avoided motherhood [and] separated sex from reproduction and asserted her own will was defined as unnatural” (Smith-Rosenberg 245), no to say monstrous. In America, Godey’s Lady’s Book (to which Poe also sent articles) defined motherhood as “the most striking and beautiful” aspect of the “female character”, which provided the “fulfillment of a woman’s physiological and moral destiny” (qtd. in Green 29). Interestingly, Poe’s narrator characterizes Berenice’s changes precisely in physical and moral terms: Egaeus talks about the changes in “the moral condition of Berenice” and the “more startling changes wrought in the physical frame of Berenice” (316, italics in both versions of the text). Karen Weekes interprets the woman’s showing her teeth as the symbol of carnal desire: in her reading Berenice undergoes “changes in her moral being”, meaning that “she exchanges innocence for sexuality, a prospect that would terrify her reclusive, passionless fiancé” (Weekes 156). Succeeding her androgynous nature in childhood, Berenice continues with denying male authority in adulthood, as well, by not accepting the role of the mother. Yet again, it is a decision to ensure her fullness and integrity, and it seems obvious that Egaeus (who aspires to become masculine and acquire a patriarchal voice) sees Berenice’s defiance as a “distortion of her personal identity” (316), “fallen condition” (316), “unnatural”5 and even revolutionary (“[…] taking deeply to heart that total wreck of her fair and gentle life, I did not fall to ponder frequently and bitterly upon the wonder-working

5 The word ‘unnatural’ occurs only in the 1835 version. “Was it my own excited imagination — or the misty influence of the atmosphere — or the uncertain twilight of the chamber — or the grey draperies which fell around her figure — that caused it to loom up in so unnatural a degree?”
means by which so strange a revolution had been so suddenly brought to pass”, 316, italics mine). Berenice as a phallic and fallen woman has already transgressed many social boundaries, yet she is represented as having the capacity to enter the male body, as well, and this is where the vampiric aspect of her character is most emphatic.

Poe’s figuration of the female vampire in the character of Berenice is represented on the one hand by the outstanding contrast regarding her energetic constitution and blooming health as opposed to the illness-ridden, deteriorating frame of her cousin. Egaeus’s being “ill of health”, stagnating under Berenice’s superabundance of energy, can be perceived in a new light if we assume that he might be suffering from gradual blood loss, which substance flows into the body of Berenice, who gains energy while that of the man slowly ebbs away. On the other hand, her possession of the teeth, long and narrow, which has been viewed so far as her means of defence against penetration, actually turns out to be her utmost tool to contaminate a male body with the parasitic intention of draining away his life. As we see, Poe’s phallic woman transgresses limitations in more than one way: being a healthy woman, she must be considered unnatural since, according to Bram Dijkstra in the nineteenth century “the anoraxic emaciation of the female body was constituted as a male ideal” (348). She has the sexual knowledge the man is craving after, which elevates her to a dominant position thus violating the social limitations of women; furthermore, she owns a ‘phallus’ time after time being put into practice that would reduce men to the same emaciated figure ascribed to women. Eugenia C. DeLamotte attributes a great deal of importance to vampirism in the formulation of a separate identity when she says it stages a threat of physical violation or transgression against the body which she defines as the “last barrier protecting the self from the other” (206). Ken Gelder in his Reading the Vampire finds the equivalent of the Other in the vampire’s identity that is different from the Self, which “difference constitutes in [the Self] an urgent threat to [its] own existence” (42–43).

Berenice’s vampiric transgression would ultimately result in the death of Egaeus, which does not happen because the drained objectified victim fights back and turns into a vampire himself. It is under his penetrating gaze that the former oppressor weakens while his life energy is gradually pumped up with the surplus he previously lacked.

Among the numerous train of maladies superinduced by that fatal and primary one which effected a revolution of so horrible a kind in the moral and physical being of my cousin, may be mentioned as the most distressing and obstinate in its nature, a
species of epilepsy not unfrequently terminating in trance itself – trance very nearly resembling positive dissolution, and from which her manner of recovery was in most instances, startlingly abrupt. (314)

The description of the woman’s disease echoes that of Lady Rowena, whose body becomes usurped by the vampire Ligeia.

And again I sunk into visions of Ligeia – and again (what marvel that I shudder while I write?), again there reached my ears a low sob from the region of the ebony bed. But why shall I minutely detail the unspeakable horrors of that night? Why shall I pause to relate how, time after time, until near the period of the grey dawn, this hideous drama of revivification was repeated; how each terrific relapse was only into a sterner and apparently more irredeemable death; how each agony wore the aspect of a struggle with some invisible foe; and how each struggle was succeeded by I know not what of wild change in the personal appearance of the corpse? (333–334)

The invisible foe of Berenice is none other but her Other, the male vampire who has finally acquired the means inevitable for her destruction and his survival. Egaeus’s shock on finding the “still breathing, still palpitating, still alive” (319) Berenice in her tomb is that of Poe’s narrator when encountering the empty tomb of Morella or Stoker’s group of men witnessing the undead Lucy Westenra returning to her resting place. The still breathing vampire is not dead, yet not alive, her immortal nature preserves life in death, though repressed underground in that “dubious in between condition” that Helen Cixous calls the uncanny, “where there is a bit too much death in life, a bit too much life in death” (qtd. in Gelder 44).

Severed from the (M)other’s breast – formulation of the Self

How are we to account for the uncanny phenomenon of the female buried alive? Is she buried in a tomb or just repressed in the unconscious of the male mind? In other words, “who has been turned into a dead body – the feminine beloved or the ‘feminine’ in the masculine lover?” (Bronfen 99). Is Berenice after all a separate identity or is the intricate relationship connecting the two stronger than family ties? So far we have seen how closely related Berenice and Egaeus are, how peculiarly their physical and mental changes are reflected in the distorted mirror of the other’s. In this paper I intended to offer a reading of “Berenice” with an eye on the social context that gives a historical background to the story. As we have
seen, nineteenth-century notions about woman’s proper place in society and the accepted norms prescribing female behavior are seriously challenged in the tale.

However, as is very often the case in Poe’s short fiction, the conflict that appears to be external actually takes place inside the psyche of the narrator whose inability to cope with mental difficulties leads him to madness. At the beginning of my paper, I emphasized Egaeus’s hesitation to leave the shadowy world of maternal security, the library chamber where his mother died in order to give birth to the son, which in turn came to stand for the extended womb of the maternal figure. The masculine principle is outside him, it has found an embodiment in Berenice, who seems to enjoy the very autonomy of being that her cousin craves. As soon as he reaches out for the masculine and decides to internalize it, the once distinct outlines of Berenice’s character begin to fade, her body is disposed of and the feminine which now abides in her is reduced to a shadow entering the man’s chamber, only to be repressed soon, without mercy, into a tomb, the unconscious of the man’s mind. If we accept Berenice as a female alter-ego, representative of the masculine principle we come to the understanding of the battle of the sexes as an internal struggle between the masculine and feminine principle going on within the consciousness of the androgynous Egaeus.

The vampiric act of draining, then, is only performed by him who is unable to let go of the maternal breast, since, as Gelder points out, breast-feeding is a peculiar form of vampirism (49). Life is taken from the mother, transfused into the masculine, which as soon as it is internalized gets rid of the maternal/feminine and buries it. The problem of the male mind, which Egaeus seems unable to solve is to balance the see-saw: to find an equilibrium between the masculine and feminine that both inhabit the realm of his consciousness, his self is being dragged from one extreme to the other, being capable of attaining full possession of the one without killing the other. The outward conflict of a masculine female and a feminine male, a female and male vampire preying on one another’s life has turned out to be a seemingly infinite battle of genders, the annihilation of either of which proves fatal to the mental faculties of the subject. The possible outcome of the internal struggle in Egaeus’s case can only be mental derangement:

With a shriek I bounded to the table, and grasped the box that lay upon it. But I could not force it open; and in my tremor, it slipped from my hands, and fell heavily, and burst into pieces; and from it, with a rattling sound, there rolled out some instruments of dental surgery, intermingled with thirty-two small, white and ivory-looking substances that were scattered to and fro about the floor (319).
In Dayan’s words, the teeth rattling across the floor “write out the derangement of a brain” *(Fables 136)*, while the uncanny cry of the repressed feminine issues from the tomb/womb.
Works Cited


