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**THE RADICALNESS OF THESE DIFFERENCES:  
READING "THE PURLOINED LETTER"**

Peter A. Muckley

*Temple University*

Dupin, master sleuth, has paid a visit to the fiendish Minister D., in search of a stolen letter. He sees a letter "radically different from the one of which the Prefect has read (us) so minute a description."<sup>1</sup> It is, he says, "the radicalness of these differences" which leads him to the conclusion that this soiled and dirty letter can be no other than the one he is in search of. In point of fact, he knew this at first glance but "the radicalness of these differences" is the strongest corroborative evidence necessary to put the matter beyond all doubt. Here, in brief compass, we find an analogy to the act of reading readings of "The Purloined Letter," the text in which the scene outlined appears.

Whether we read Daniel Hoffman's *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe* and discover "the primal truths and anguish of our being," or, with David Halliburton, find an anticipation of "the procedures of Martin Heidegger," we know, at first glance, that we are dealing with the very same "Purloined Letter."<sup>2</sup> Further, it is "the radicalness of these differences" in the various interpretations which precisely corroborates our knowledge. This is because we expect a richly textured and multi-layered artwork to generate variegated critical readings. It is important to canvass these readings, both for their intrinsic value in helping us better appreciate what can be posited of the text, and for the light they shed on what happens when any one reading attempts to appropriate Poe's tale. We shall then be in a better position to consider: 1) "The Purloined Letter" in relation to Poe's work as a whole; 2) its relative status in the context of the literary world; and 3) one more re-reading of the story itself, hopefully excluding the extravagances of certain interpretations, while incorporating the most fruitful features of each individual interpretation. To this end, we might begin with a consideration of one particularly outré critical school, the psychoanalytic.

Jacques Lacan's reading of Marie Bonaparte's reading of Baudelaire's, apparent, misreading of the text became part of a campaign to effect a coup in the palace of French psychoanalysis. Bonaparte had seen "The Purloined Letter" as representing "in effect, the Oedipal struggle."<sup>3</sup> The vision had had Freud's venerable blessing. Bonaparte, then, could be viewed as King Freud's French Queen. When Lacan attempted to undermine her position and usurp her authority, he was, from the tale's standpoint, acting as the unscrupulous Minister D.

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Parodically, and aptly enough, Jacques Derrida thereupon entered the interpretive arena as Dupin. His "The Purveyor of Truth" showed that, while Lacan's method of interpretation differed radically from Bonaparte's, the truth of the text for both was located in an Oedipal triad.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Derrida revealed that Lacan had stolen Bonaparte's, ultimately Freud's, truth for his own self-glorification. In doing so, however, Derrida re-enacted that very triadic structure. Hence, the parodic nature of the Derridean enterprise.<sup>5</sup> While proving the falsity of the psychoanalytic readings of "The Purloined Letter," Derrida himself became the Dupin of this false reading, while Bonaparte played the Queen, and Lacan, the fiendish Minister D\_. Such is the bizarre nature of what reading readings of "The Purloined Letter" may result in.

Nor did psychoanalytic, and deconstructive psychoanalytic, readings end there. The whole question was taken up again by Barbara Johnson in an essay entitled "The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida."<sup>6</sup> She showed that whoever oversaw the interpretation of the text would automatically assume the Dupin position. Ironically, as her title indicates, her discussion too inevitably revolves around three terms, as had Bonaparte's, Lacan's, and Derrida's.<sup>7</sup>

One final off-shoot of the psychoanalytic branch might be cited for it will lead us back to the problems involved in readings of "The Purloined Letter," and help us determine their common roots. That off-shoot is Shoshana Felman's "On Reading Poetry."<sup>8</sup> Viewing Lacan's contribution as having a liberating effect in its insistence on "the unreadable in the text," Felman concludes that the tale should be treated as "not just an allegory of psychoanalysis but also, at the same time, an allegory of poetic writing." It is Felman's own insistence, with no explanation whatever, that "The Purloined Letter" be viewed as an allegory of, at least, some kind that makes her work exemplary. No matter which critical reading we approach, we shall find a tendency to allegorize the story's meaning to make it fit into some preconceived pattern of the critic's own devising. We shall find, also, that the more universalizing and all encompassing any particular critic's schema is, the greater will be the deviation from the text itself. In short, "The Purloined Letter" is itself constantly being purloined for the sake of critical power bids.

Before moving on to more sober analyses of "The Purloined Letter," it is as well to confront the psychoanalytic readings to clear the text of their shadow in the hopes of achieving some critical insights. Bonaparte, as we have seen, considered the story to be essentially Oedipal. The story, then, was really about a father and son's struggle

"over the mother's penis" (Bonaparte, p. 483). Her analysis stemmed from the fact that Freud held that the realization of the mother's lack of a penis is "the greatest trauma" (Derrida, p. 87). Given Bonaparte's desire to find a triadic structure in the work, it is not surprising that she indeed found one. Lacan too found what he wished to find, though he complicated his analysis by making explicit the repetition scene which Bonaparte had taken for granted. Felman, following Lacan, also highlighted the two scenes in which the letter is stolen, but extended her conclusion to the role of the literary critic, because she is one.

It is difficult to believe that any of these interpreters ever actually read the story. Even a cursory inspection would show that the two "dispossessing the possessor" scenes are radically different. In the first, there are two "exalted personages," and the Minister D\_. In the second, there are only two people, Dupin and the Minister. In the first scene, the King, so he might be dubbed solely for convenience, is not "not seeing," as Lacan and Felman maintain, but not even looking. In the second, again contra Lacan and Felman, there are no police who are "not seeing" but simply no police at all. The only third character in the recovery episode is "the pretended lunatic," actually a man in Dupin's pay, who is not in the room at all.

Little or no attention has been paid this character for he is as disturbing to the Paris crowd as he would prove to be to any wide ranging critical interpretation. Yet, his role is vital to the outcome of the tale. Without him, as Dupin remarks, he "might never have left the Ministerial presence alive" (697). He has, moreover, a piquant rightness, and an artistic significance. In the midst of a defenseless "crowd of women and children," a madman appears with a musket. The clamor disturbs the Minister, who, it should be noted, is a moral madman, a monstrum horrendum, a threat to civil order. The "lunatic" is found to be harmless, the musket "without ball," at precisely the moment that D\_ himself is rendered harmless by Dupin's stealing the letter. What, unknown to him, the Minister actually witnesses from his window is a pantomime of his own predicament, a staging of his true identity and fate. The brief drama, designed by Dupin, is as integral to the tale as Hamlet's *The Mousetrap* is to Hamlet, while it also adds to the rich doubling motif that runs throughout "The Purloined Letter." Further, the exalted female personage, who was threatened "in her boudoir" in the first scene, has become a whole crowd of women and children threatened in a public place. Thus, Poe points up the societal and general implications of the Minister's outrage against a single woman. As in a Greek Tragedy, what endangers the Queen has repercussions throughout the entire body politic. Dupin's

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immediate reference to "the good people of Paris," on recounting this episode, is then, not totally ironic, nor is it without resonance in terms of the text as a whole.

Our overview of psychoanalytical interpretations, therefore, has revealed, in their starkest form, certain general features of critical readings as these pertain to "The Purloined Letter." There is a tendency for a generative reading, such as Bonaparte's, to perpetuate its own focus of vision, the triadic structure, in all subsequent readings to which it gives rise, regardless of that vision's incompatibility with the elements of the text. Also, there is a tendency to allegorize the characters and significance of the text. The work, once appropriated, is used as a source of power, rather like the purloined letter itself, to undermine, or enhance, the authority of one favored critic, or critical reading, within the same school. There is an absolute disregard of the "minor" details of the tale since these cannot be assimilated to, and would prove disruptive of, the totalizing vision. To such critical schools, to actually read the story would be a veritable Herbert Spencerian tragedy; "a hypothesis destroyed by a fact." The four aspects here noted, to a greater or lesser degree, characterize all exhaustive critical readings of "The Purloined Letter."

Thus, to address only the last of these aspects, in no interpretation do we find any reference to the "pretended lunatic," cited above, even though madness pervades Poe's entire oeuvre, and many words have been expended, by Richard Wilbur, for instance, on the significance of the Orang Outang in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue."<sup>9</sup> Again, little has been said of the narrator. The general verdict on him is captured by Joseph Moldenhauer's observation that "the voice of the ratiocinative tales is that of the apprentice figure."<sup>10</sup> The only significant advance on this judgement is to be found in Brander Matthews's "Poe and the Detective Story," written as early as 1907.<sup>11</sup> Matthews argued that the narrator mediates between us and the staggering genius of Dupin, and suggested he be viewed as a Greek chorus who incites us to astonishment. In this light, the narrator would fit in neatly with the Greek parallel we noted in connection with the public implications of the act against the Queen. Nevertheless, suggestive as this Grecian motif is, it leaves out of account the importance Poe generally gives his narrators and, more specifically, fails to see any development in the narrating persona, from "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," through "The Mystery of Marie Roget," to "The Purloined Letter" itself.

By the time of the latter, the narrator is no longer just a voice or chorus but has become a shrewd, critical intelligence, capable of

laughing with the Prefect G\_, and at Dupin and itself. These brief incursions into almost virgin critical territory will be important when we finally come to a re-reading of the text. They point to the uniqueness of "The Purloined Letter," a uniqueness too often sacrificed to some abstracting critical scheme.

Together with the narrator and the hired man, the Prefect G\_ has received scant regard from critics, though he has attracted an unfair amount of abuse. None of this abuse is warranted by the text. He is pompous, over methodical, plodding, and even given to cant but, on the Prefect's arrival "au troisième, No. 33," the narrator distinctly states: "We gave him a hearty welcome" (680). He risks losing his job by confiding in Dupin. He has his human side too. He owns, "my honor is interested, and...the reward is enormous." Here, his motives for redeeming the letter exactly reduplicate those of Dupin. Dupin, we remember, is quick to produce his cheque book for the fifty thousand franc reward, while his deeper motivation is a matter of honor, revenge for the evil turn that the Minister D\_ did him at Vienna.

Nor is this all. The very title of the story is taken from the Prefect's coinage (681). That the other characters adopt his linguistic usage, at least, suggests they all share a community of values. This impression is enhanced by the fact that G\_'s description of the Minister, "the thief...who dares all things, those unbecoming as well as those becoming a man" (682), is a preformulation of Dupin's own evaluation of D\_ as "that monstrem horrendum, an unprincipled man of genius" (697). Like the peasants who linguistically fused both the mansion and the family into "The House of Usher," in "The Fall of the House of Usher," G\_'s language usage is a guarantee to the reader that a value system obtains beyond the walls of any one individual's self enclosed world, be it Roderick Usher's "Palace of Art," or the Minister D\_'s attendant infested hotel. Even when Dupin had been at his most dismissive of the police, in "The Mystery of Marie Roget," he had twice dubbed them "myrmidons" (519, 549), though he, presumably, does so for their uniform, ant-like qualities, by so doing, he implies that the Prefect must be considered as Aeacus, Achilles, or, at the very least, Patroclus.

Far fetched as this may be, in "The Purloined Letter," if nowhere else, G\_ should be considered as one of "the musketeers" fighting to protect the Queen's honor; a little slow, a little conceited, but the very embodiment of the norms of honor shared by the narrator and Dupin. We shall return to this theme later.

All the most influential, and, in fact, the best, readings of "The Purloined Letter" have been embedded in studies that have treated the

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story in the context of Poe's work as a whole. In reviewing them, therefore, we may, rather economically, assess the importance of the tale in the context of Poe's total achievement and development. Thus, Joseph Moldenhauer sees the tales of ratiocination as expressing the active/manic pole of Poe's sensibility, the other pole, the submissive/depressive, being represented in the poems and the tales of terror. In the Dupin stories, he points out, the "materials of moral experience are rendered beautiful by the detective's superhuman, aesthetic, intelligence" (Moldenhauer, p. 287). Dupin, then, is, like a god, or demigod, a master artist forming coherent order from discordant experience. Moldenhauer, further, makes Dupin into an analogy of the Poe critical persona. In doing so, he anticipates David Ketterer's point that the detective stories, with their emphasis on intuition and reason, are an essential step on the road to "Eureka."<sup>12</sup>

Robert Daniel, in one of the finest studies, shows how Dupin unites, in one character, three of Poe's most treasured personae: Poe, the puzzle solver, as in the *Graham's Magazine* challenge; Usher, the decadent aristocrat; Poe, the critic and lover of paradox. He mentions that Dupin, in explaining how the Prefect is misled by simplicity, echoes Poe's discussion of prosody in "The Rationale of Verse."<sup>13</sup> Where Daniel is most suggestive, however, is in his treatment of the detective story as a genre. He sees it as having close connections with the rise of the city, coupled with the public demand for a new realism, in the 1840's. He also underlines two fantastic elements in the detective story, which militated against the new realism; the bizarre nature of the crimes to be solved, and the intuitive solution by an amateur. These points, though we should have to modify the word "bizarre" in relation to "The Purloined Letter," are extremely suggestive for they emphasize the very public nature of the genre.

Finally, we should look at the works of Richard Wilbur and Daniel Hoffman since both are expertly acute critics of the Dupin stories. Moreover, as both critics cover Poe's total oeuvre, their works help us to better locate the importance of the tale. Wilbur views all of Poe's work as ultimately tending to an embodiment of visionary truth. He considers Dupin as an early version of Poe's Kepler, in "Eureka," who understands the meaning of the universe "through mere dint of intuition" (Wilbur, pp. 62-70). He, further, says, of "the Purloined Letter," "despite its adequacy as a detective tale, and as a vindication of pure intuition, (it) is also an allegory of conflict within a single soul" (Wilbur, p. 62). He then goes on to show the many parallels between various characters in the tale and those in other Poe stories. Thus, the Queen is like Ligeia, and should be considered as "that sense of beauty

which must not be the captive of our lower nature." The Prefect is "that methodical reason which creeps and crawls." The Minister D\_ is like William Wilson, the orangutan or Fortunato. That is, he is the double and our bestial nature. (Wilbur, pp. 61-63). In short, while Wilbur encourages us to consider "The Purloined Letter" as combining many of Poe's preoccupations, his tendency to allegorize the work robs it of all specificity and uniqueness. Like his "The House of Poe," the studies here referred to often leave the re-reader wondering, "if the stories can be so readily schematized, are they worth reading at all?"

No such response will be elicited from Hoffman's reading of "The Purloined Letter." Beneath the pyrotechnics and ellipses of his style, Hoffman offers a reading which is fully consonant with all the features of the text. He detects a love story in which the original letter to the Queen was penned by her lover, Dupin. In Dupin's replacing of this letter with a facsimile, also written by Dupin, Hoffman spies the perfect revenge, and accounts for the significance of the Crebillon quotation which ends the tale. In Crebillon himself, Hoffman notes a precursor of both Poe and Dupin; an artist fallen on evil days, slandered at court, and living in "a garret with dogs, cats, and ravens" (Hoffman, p. 133). Further, unlike Wilbur, he takes seriously Dupin's revenge motive and relates it to his repaying Le Bon in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." This is an important point for it underscores the humanizing of Dupin, which Wilbur's allegorizing formalism overlooks, and which, moreover, was to become a part of Poe's legacy to Conan Doyle, in whose works the Minister D\_ was transmogrified into the diabolical Moriarty. Hoffman makes two more important contributions. Firstly, he links "the unscrupulous genius of D\_" to "the resolute genius of Dupin" and equates this link with "an indictment" of the system which has no place "for intellectual distinction, for genius" (p. 121). He thereby, reinforces the artist criminal theme beloved of the romantics. Although I believe he is wrong to do so, after all the smart boy in the marble game was able to identify with a dullard, yet this placing of the story in a wider societal context will be crucial when we come to our reading of "The Purloined Letter." Finally, and no mean contribution, Hoffman dubs the story, "this masterpiece of ratiocination" (p. 136).

The reason why this last is both welcome and somewhat surprising is that few of the readings scanned have felt called upon to make any evaluative aesthetic pronouncement on "The Purloined Letter." This is odd, in light of Poe's intense consciousness of purely aesthetic value, in such critical works as "The Rationale of Verse" and "The Philosophy of Composition." The critics enable us to address "The Letter" as an



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essential step towards "Eureka." They give us insight into important aspects of the tale, such as the function of the Queen, the role of Dupin, the "eternal triangle" configuration, the detective genre, the typical Poe preoccupations, and the like. What they fail, or, perhaps, do not attempt, to assess is whether or not "The Purloined Letter" works as art. Doubtless, they imply that it, self-evidently, does. Nevertheless, the fact that it conforms, almost perfectly, to Poe's strictures on poetic composition, in its suggestiveness, its structural compactness, its single, well-wrought theme, and its economy of language: this is seldom explicitly formulated. Again, while Ketterer, admirably, indicates how the criminal motivation becomes increasingly rational, in the Dupin trilogy, "from the irrationality of the orangutan, the crime passionel...to political advancement," he does not give any aesthetic grounds for this shift in emphasis (Ketterer, p. 251).

Yet, what strikes the reader of "The Purloined Letter" is its near perfection of form and the inevitability of the action. It does not verge on the ludicrous, as "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" does. In the former, "Dupin's fancy reasoning" is not "made supererogatory by his possession of the tuft of hair," as it is in "The Murders" (Daniel, p. 50). Neither is the narration over-prolix, as "The Mystery of Marie Roget" tends to be. "The Purloined Letter" is about one half the length of "The Murders," and one third that of "The Mystery." In the first paragraph, the scene is set: some self advertisement, by allusion to "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "the Mystery of Marie Roget," is accomplished; and the three principal actors of the drama are presented. By page three, the reader knows the crime, the criminal, and the motive. By page eight, the case is solved. The remaining ten pages recount the subdued titanic struggle between Dupin and the Minister D\_. The theorizing is minimal. What makes this density and economy the more remarkable is that all the characters, save Dupin, are merely letters. Using only the smallest unit of the literary artist's tools, the "I" narrator, two "exalted personages," D\_ and G\_, Poe succeeds in evoking complex relationships and a subtle web of conflicts. "The Purloined Letter" is surely a triumph of artistic accomplishment; some letters purloined from the language have been made to yield up a fused unity which can arouse our sympathies, touch our moral sensibilities, and cause an immense proliferation of critical readings.

Of the detective stories, "The Purloined Letter" is by far the most perfect of Poe's achievements. He himself recognized this, with uncharacteristic modesty, when he wrote to Lowell, in 1844, that it was "perhaps the best of my tales of ratiocination."<sup>14</sup> Part of what makes

it the best is that very rationality which Ketterer noted. As Mabbott expressed it, "its great merit lies in the fascination of the purely intellectual plot, and in the absence of the sensational."<sup>15</sup> In this respect only "The Gold-Bug" even approximates it. In terms of Poe's entire oeuvre, it not only most nearly approaches Poe's own high aesthetic standards but would meet the demands of almost any conceivable appraisive criteria; be those realist, symbolist, or whatever. Its ability to accommodate incompatible schools is exemplified in the very title itself. "The Purloined Letter" is as descriptively literal of the story's content as anyone could wish. And still, that strange word "purloin" (Norman Fr, *purloigner*: pur, away + loign, far), pompous in any other context, is here so pregnant of allusions to folk tales and the long ago, to French court intrigues, to displacements, and to dreams.

R. M. Fletcher has distinguished three distinct idioms which go to form Poe's style: "his mechanically stereotyped vocabulary; his vocabulary of momentary inspiration; his vocabulary based on allusion and analogy." He showed that, when these vocabularies are working in harmony, as they indeed are in "The Purloined Letter," Poe is "writing at his very best."<sup>16</sup> Here we find a serious and detailed stylistic appraisal of Poe's tale also bearing out the high praise this short story surely deserves. The self-sufficiency of the plot, and the succinctness of the presentation, which we have examined, are also Poe "writing at his very best."

Among the many intriguing obiter dicta which Derrida let drop, there is a mention, but only a mention, of the story's "framing" (Derrida, p. 102). A scrutiny of this feature of the work will reveal a remarkable dexterity in narrative technique, just one further instance that "The Purloined Letter" is Poe "at his very best."

The "I," as we have seen, recounts the arrival of G\_. The time is evening. The season is autumn. The year is 18\_\_. The saga continues with some brisk, realistic dialogue, in the course of which G\_ tells of the Minister D\_'s action initiating act. One month elapses, and again, G\_ arrives to find "I" and Dupin "occupied very nearly as before." Dialogue ensues. G\_ leaves with the letter. Dupin then details, in the past tense, his successful ploy to out-manoeuvre the Minister D\_. Thus, we have three narrators, three tales told in the past, three tales told in a library. It is as if time past only lives to be recaptured in time present, in a library. The effect is to confer an eternal significance on the events narrated. "The Purloined Letter" is the perfect realization of the goals of the early "Folio Club," the culmination of what Poe could achieve in, and with, letters, when not simply using them to "X Paragrabs."

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Should such an assessment of "The Purloined Letter," in relation to Poe's artistic evolution seem valid, it would certainly make the story an eligible candidate for high office in the literary world. As a short story, it is a prototype of that specialty of American short story writers from James through Hemingway to Barthelme; the art of leaving things out. So, we do not know what indiscretion the Queen was guilty of. For the matter of that, we do not even know she is the Queen. We do not know what relationship obtains between Dupin and D\_. We do not even know if there is one. We do not know the contents of the letter. In fact, we do not know much at all. Hence, the radicalness of the differences in readings which we have traced. If it is one of the aims of the greatest modern short stories to make the reader work, "The Purloined Letter" is a tyrannic master of a precursor.

In the literary annals, of course, Poe has a peculiar position as the inventor of the detective genre, or sub genre. This is a peculiar position because, although the acknowledged experts from Conan Doyle to Dorothy L. Sayers would agree that Poe is the founder, most critics are not very happy with such a sub genre being considered literature at all. What rankles is that the detective story is an immensely popular literary form. Somewhat like the Prefect G\_, literary critics are usually guilty of a non distributo medii. Believing that "bad art" is popular, they thence infer that "popular art" is bad. It was because of this bias that we likened G\_, not fortuitously, to one of the three musketeers; the historical romance is second only in popularity to detective fiction, and Dumas' romance is contemporaneous with "The Purloined Letter."

Elements of the detective story are hinted at in Voltaire's *Zadig* and Godwin's *Caleb Williams*, but it is Poe who established all the basic ingredients in one type of tale. "The Purloined Letter" is, moreover, the perfection of the type, and so its literary standing depends, in large part, upon the way popular fiction, especially detective fiction, is viewed.

We could argue, as was done in "The Detective and the Boundary," that all modern fiction tends to the condition of the detective story, but this seems to overstate the case.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, it seems true, as Daniel stressed, that detective fiction is intimately connected with the rise of the city, and with the urban consciousness. Hence, it is not surprising that Dickens' best works have a strong element of the detective tale in them. Here, it might be added that while Boffin, in *Our Mutual Friend*, possesses omniscience as great as any Dupin attains to, no critic has seen fit to label Boffin, God, or accuse Dickens of megalomania, as so many have so labelled Dupin, and accused Poe.

To a large extent, I believe, Poe and Dupin have suffered needlessly because so few critics have bothered to notice the narrator.

However that may be, the detective genre deals with the city and with crime. Since both are present in our lives to, at least, a fair extent, to dismiss such fiction as somehow marginal is preposterous. As we have already found, "The Purloined Letter" is a major artistic achievement. We might therefore, consider what a perceptive critic and artist, W. H. Auden, says of the genre to which it gave rise. Auden considers it the task of the private eye to restore "a fallen world to its prelapsarian innocence by solving the crime...and thus make possible the restoration of order under justice" (Hoffman, p. 132). This view will prove valuable for our discussion of "The Purloined Letter." First, however, let us clarify the obvious in the text.

To re-read "The Purloined Letter," after re-reading readings of "The Purloined Letter," is a refreshing experience. Here we have a very short story. It is set in Paris. The Minister D\_ has stolen a letter from a lady, and is using it to blackmail her. The Prefect of Police knows that D\_ must have the letter close by, for he must have access to it at all times. Nevertheless, after three months of exhaustive search, including the use of police disguised as footpads, the Prefect has been unable to find the letter. He turns to Dupin for help. Dupin advises him to look again. After a month, the Prefect returns. He has not found the letter. Dupin hands it to him. The Prefect leaves, and Dupin explains to his friend how he had been to visit the Minister. From behind his tinted glasses, he had seen the letter left in the most obvious place, though it was disguised. Dupin left the apartment and his gold snuff box. Next morning, he returned. While talking to the Minister, a shot is heard in the street. The noise came from an empty gun, fired into a crowd by one of Dupin's men, pretending to be a lunatic. D\_ goes to see what is happening, and Dupin re-steals the letter, leaving a duplicate in its place. In the letter which he leaves, Dupin has written some lines, from a tragedy, which he is sure will enable D\_ to know who has tricked him. This he does because D\_ had once done him "an evil turn" in Vienna.

The above is a bald plot summary. It is a naive, possibly, a banal, reading. We must remember, however, the Prefect himself was fooled by simplicity. It is an attempt to give an outline of all the surface features of the text in as non-tendentious a manner as possible. What immediately stands out? There is certainly a lot of disguising going on. The police disguise themselves as footpads; in doing so, they behave like criminals, as Dupin must think like the criminal D\_ in order to outwit him. Dupin dons a type of disguise by wearing his

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green glasses. The purloined letter is disguised. Dupin's man in the street is disguised. Dupin leaves a disguised letter.

Closely connected with disguise, there is a lot of "doubling" taking place. The Prefect visits Dupin twice and searches D\_ twice. Dupin visits D\_ twice. The same letter is purloined twice. There are two "evil turns," two D's, two robberies, and two "gangs"; the police and D\_'s attendants. The Prefect has two motives for trying to protect the lady; honor and money. Dupin shares these two motives. The lines, which Dupin quotes in the facsimile letter, refer to two brothers, Thyestes and Atreus, who shared the same Queen. What does so much doubling, so much disguise, suggest? One way to approach the question might be to trace what is not doubled in the text.

There is only one lady, only one city, only one crime, only one overall narrator, and only one male "exalted personage." The Minister D\_, too, has only one motive, power. The crime which precipitates the action is blackmail. Blackmail presupposes social conventions. It is pre-eminently a social crime. Again, it makes little sense to blackmail anyone other than "an exalted personage" of some kind. Once you do, the repercussions are felt throughout the whole social sphere she moves in. Should the "personage" occupy a sufficiently exalted station, an entire city, or nation, may suffer. Our discreet entities now begin to merge. The lady becomes Paris, or, as noted earlier, she is at one with the defenceless women of Paris, threatened by a lunatic D\_.

We are left then with but four monads. Blackmail certainly confers power and so these two terms might, provisionally, be merged. That leaves the narrator and the male "exalted personage." The male, the "King," "from whom it was her wish to conceal" the letter (682), is the representative of whatever conventional code the lady has violated. The narrator is that other code, elemental human sympathy or love, that champions the lady and sets a new moral standard by which the reader must judge the affair, if he hearkens to the story at all. This moral standard is not conventional, but, rather, aesthetic; it is part of the narrative presentation.

We left blackmail and power temporarily linked because dyads seemed especially promising in light of the obvious pairings in the text. The instrument of blackmail is, of course, the purloined letter itself. Of this letter, the narrator remarks, "it is this possession, and not any employment of the letter, which bestows the power" (683). This is, obviously, always true of the instrument of blackmail. Of what else is it true? Deterrence at once springs to mind. Deterrence, however, is simply one form of power politics. The letter is an exact analogue of the very essence of political power itself. Take the

punitive power of the State, for example. The ultimate threat the State reserves for its recalcitrant members is death. Should the State ever exercise the death penalty, however, it loses all control over the erring one forever. This is an extreme instance but it lies at the basis of all power.<sup>18</sup>

Political power is always conventional, though it masquerades as the natural. The King represents this power, the Minister D\_ manipulates it, the Queen suffers under it. From an analysis of blackmail, which like power involves three terms -wielder, instrument, and victim—we can see how the numerous triads reviewed, in relation to psychoanalytic readings and narrative technique, are readily accommodated in our reading. Nor should such a reading be confused with Adlerian power principles; we are not dealing with any subconscious drives, in either Poe or the characters, but with an interpretation of the text. Political power is always conventional, it always masquerades as the natural. Wherever it does, the unconventional, which is freedom, must go in motley.

We are now in a position to see what the doubling and disguises suggest. The only way to combat power, while its instruments are in the possession of the tyrant, is to adopt a disguise, to practise duplicity. This is a truth Kent and Edgar, in *King Lear*, recognize from bitter experience. The difference between the world of Shakespeare and that of Poe is that there is no "order under justice" to be restored in the latter's. Morality is no longer theology bound, as Auden's acute observation misleadingly implies. In the city, morality is a matter of individual choice. There are no divine sanctions but there is, occasionally, profound human sympathy, especially of victims for a victim; "the good people of Paris" for the Queen. It is indeed noteworthy that neither of these innocent parties are able to adopt disguise.

What moral code does exist in the city is the code of honor of the Dupin's and the Prefect G\_'s. These are men capable of manipulating power structures for the public good. Their code is not incompatible with money. Money, after all, unlike power, requires social intercourse and, at least, a minimum of trust. It can, of course, become a power fetish. Gold, however, more easily assumes this role. And, does not Dupin leave a gold snuff box on D\_'s desk?

Finally, there is another code in the city; this is the aesthetic morality embodied in the narrator's narrative. What is restored, along with the purloined letter to the Queen, is not, in Auden's formulation, "prelapsarian innocence" but rather that balance between the conventional and the play of freedom which we might regard as a kind of order.

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The police duplicate, even act like, D\_'s henchmen for they represent one configuration of political power. They would follow the King, they would follow D\_. It is the good luck of the city that they, at the moment, follow G\_, and that G\_ has chosen to identify himself with the Queen, with the oppressed. On a plane unrecognized by Hoffman, when he equates the artist with the criminal, Dupin never identifies with the Minister D\_ (Hoffman, p. 124). This is the plane of morality. Thus, Dupin clearly states, "I have no sympathy, at least no pity, for him who descends"(697). He may have sympathy for (can think like) D\_, since both are outside the rule imposed conventions personified in the King. He has no pity, for pity, as Aristotle reminded us, is quintessentially an aesthetic/moral fellow feeling.

Like the end of Poe's tale, we are back with the Greeks, as we were when detailing the public repercussions of the crime against the Queen, the relationship between G\_ and Patroclus, the narrator and the classical Greek chorus. Nor is this strange. The Greeks created, and perfected, the city, just as Poe created, and perfected, the art form of the city, the detective story. In its finest form, in "The Purloined Letter," how could it help but be policial and political? How could it help but reveal its debt to Greece?

We have canvassed various readings of "The Purloined Letter." We have attempted to situate the story within the corpus of Poe's work, and within the wider literary world. Finally, we have set forth a simplistic reading of "The Purloined Letter," and but one more interpretation of that text. In doing these things, we have noted what "bizarceries" may result from attempting to appropriate the work, perhaps, we too have even fallen victim to them. No readings exhaust the rich mine that is the text, though certain readings inevitably exhaust the reader. In "the radicalness of their differences," however, we find sufficient testimony to the unique greatness which is "The Purloined Letter."

**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup>All references to Poe's work are to *Edgar Allan Poe: Poetry and Tales*, ed. Patrick F. Quinn (New York, 1984). All future quotations will be followed by page number in parentheses.

<sup>2</sup>For Hoffman, see Daniel Hoffman, *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe* (New York, 1973), p. 136. For Halliburton, see David Halliburton, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Phenomenological View* (Princeton, 1973), p. 244.

<sup>3</sup>See Marie Bonaparte, *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Psycho-Analytic Interpretation*, forward by Sigmund Freud, trans., John Rodker (London, 1949).

<sup>4</sup>Jacques Derrida, "The Purveyor of Truth," *YFS*, 52 (1975), 31-113.

<sup>5</sup>To be fair to Derrida, it should be stressed that he knew exactly what he was doing.

<sup>6</sup>Barbara Johnson, "The Frame of reference: Poe Lacan, Derrida," *Psychoanalysis and the Question of the Text*, ed. Geoffrey Hartman (Baltimore, 1987).

<sup>7</sup>Here, it might be remarked that the whole theory of "the oedipus complex" has been successfully called into question by Robin Fox. Fox shows that what Freud saw as a universal human phenomenon was, more likely, a very rare, parochial condition only obtaining, if at all, in Upper Middle class, late 19th century Vienna. It is therefore, perhaps, no surprise that psychoanalytic critics find it impossible to read a specific text without generalizing it out of all recognition. See Robin Fox, *The Red Lamp of Incest* (New York, 1980).

<sup>8</sup>See Shoshana Felman, "On Reading Poetry," *Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York, 1985), pp. 119-139.

<sup>9</sup>See Richard Wilbur, *Responses: Collected Essays, 1953-1976* (New York, 1976), esp. pp. 60-64.

<sup>10</sup>See Joseph Moldenhauer, "Murder as a Fine Art: Basic Connections between Poe's Aesthetics, Psychology, and Moral Vision," *PMLA*, 83 (1968), 284-297.

<sup>11</sup>See Brander Matthews, "Poe and the Detective Story," *Scribner's*, 42 (1907), 287-293.

<sup>12</sup>See David Ketterer, *The Rationale of Deception in Poe* (Baton Rouge, 1979).

<sup>13</sup>See Robert Daniel, "Poe Detective God," *Furioso*, 6 (1951), 45-54.

<sup>14</sup>See letter to Lowell (1844), in *The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. John Ward Ostrom (New York, 1966), 1:258.

<sup>15</sup>See Thomas O. Mabbott, ed. *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe, Tales and Sketches, 1843-1849* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), 3: 972.



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<sup>16</sup>See Ricard M. Fletcher, *The Stylistic Development of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York, 1973), p. 78.

<sup>17</sup>For this interesting viewpoint, see William V. Spanos "The Detective and the Boundary," in *Case Book on Existentialism*, (New York, 1966), Vol. 2.

<sup>18</sup>A full discussion of power, especially political power, would be inappropriate here. The interested reader may consult Elias Canetti's *Crowds and Power* (Harmondsworth, 1976), for a detailed account of the view informing this paper.