

### **Masculinity and Power in Poe's "Purloined Letter"**

While women often loom large in the subtexts of Poe's tales, within the physical texts, they exist in the margins, their characterizations exceedingly underdeveloped. Rather, it is the men who both tell the tales, and take center stage in them. With men occupying such a large portion of the physical and narrative space in Poe's stories, examining the functions of these male characters can reveal interesting insights into Poe's overarching philosophies. "The Purloined Letter" serves as an especially useful vehicle for this type of study. The tale is the third in Poe's ratiocinative trilogy. In the first installment, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue", an unnamed narrator introduces his friend, C. Auguste Dupin, who unravels the mystery surrounding a pair of inexplicably gory killings in a Paris apartment. In the second installment, "The Mystery of Marie Roget", the narrator watches Dupin reason through the case of the titular heiress's murder. While Dupin and the narrator return in "The Purloined Letter", the story stands in stark contrast to the preceding ones in its minimalism and apparent triviality. Its simple plot revolves around a letter, stolen from a monarch by a politician, the Minister D—. As the Prefect of police, G—, struggles to find the letter, which he knows to be located in D—'s room, he turns to Dupin for help. Poe's stripped-down detective tale is less driven by event than by character; in particular, male character. Centering on a standoff between three men – the Minister D—, the Prefect G—, and Dupin – the story acts as a meditation on manhood and power. Each man embodies a distinct notion of masculinity, and projects this notion upon the letter. Through juxtaposing the motivations of these characters and their attachments with the letter, Poe makes an impassioned case for an empathetic, dualistic intellect as the ultimate, transcendent form of masculine power.

The Minister D— represents a type of manhood that is deeply rooted in a desire to dominate and influence others. He clearly intends to use – and already has used – the stolen document to increase his authority and influence in the highest chambers of government. As the Prefect notes, in the months subsequent to the purloinment, D— has wielded his power “for political purposes, to a very dangerous extent” (Poe 255). However, while political influence is an important goal for the Minister, considering the modes of his theft, and his subsequent possession of the letter, reveals another, more sinister objective. As G— recounts to Dupin and the narrator, the Minister purloins the letter in the presence of the female monarch, who “saw”, but “dared not call attention to the act, in the presence of the third personage who stood at her elbow” (Poe 255). Stealth is antithetical to the method of the purloinment, which is equally an act of theft and a male chauvinistic demonstration of power. Thieving the letter in itself is insufficient to endow the Minister with “an ascendancy over the illustrious personage whose honor and peace are so jeopardized” (Poe 255). The queen must also be made fully aware of the identity of the man behind the deed, and her powerlessness to stop it. Thus, the Minister’s act is fundamentally one of female subjugation. Dupin alludes to this towards the end, when he observes that “for eighteen months the Minister has had her in his power” (Poe 268). For the Minister, possession of the letter not only signifies possession of political power, but possession of the woman who was its intended recipient.

The Prefect, Monsieur G— , who features in both of Poe’s preceding tales of detection, is emblematic of a rational, materialistic variety of manhood. A product of enlightenment-era ideals of trusting wholly in science and in one’s own logical faculties, G— attempts to recover the purloined letter with a zealous brand of empiricism. The Prefect devotes many words to describing his method of searching the Minister’s premises, pridefully recounting his attention to

detail in opening every drawer, removing the tops from all the tables, and perusing each book upon the shelves. His seemingly-thorough examination is framed in the language of a scientific experiment – he systematically divides the surface of the house into “numbered” compartments, examining the dust on every piece of furniture “by the aid of a most powerful microscope” (Poe 258). The Prefect’s empirical mindset is reflected by his materialistic motivation, which manifests through his persistent references to the substantial cash reward offered to the person who retrieves the letter. Early on, he mentions that this reward has “lately been doubled” (Poe 259), and that because of this, he would be “perfectly willing to take advice, and to pay for it” (Poe 260). In the capitalistic, scientific order that G— seems to strongly identify with, financial status – as an easily measurable entity – is the way for a man to assert his societal power. Thus, this forms his main objective in securing the titular document, and he comes to view its possession as a ticket to material wealth.

The Prefect’s conception of masculinity contrasts with the Minister’s primal, feudalistic view on masculine power, in which the object is to achieve the maximum level of political and interpersonal influence over others, particularly those of the opposite sex. The Prefect’s view towards women also shows itself to be distinct from the Minister’s. While the Minister is bent on a possessive ascendancy over the queen, G— takes a less ruthless approach that nonetheless displays his attitudes of male superiority. In his initial conversation with Dupin and the narrator, G— states that the queen, “driven to despair”, has “committed the matter” to him, and immediately proceeds to all but affirm Dupin’s sardonic retort that “no more sagacious agent” than he, “could be desired” (Poe 256). Rather than the queen being an object to actively dominate, G— sees the queen as an imperiled soul whom only he, through his knowledge and

instruments of science, can help. As a result, the letter comes to bear the hapless Prefect's validity as a male savior, in addition to his aspirations for increasing his material wealth.

The central triad in Poe's story is rounded off by Dupin, who represents an empathetic and dual-intellectual brand of masculinity. In stark contrast to both the Minister and the Prefect, Dupin shows himself to be driven not by any sort of tangible gain, but by the pure exercise of intellect. While it is true that the detective cashes in for fifty thousand francs when he delivers the letter to the Prefect, the fact that he is only informed of the existence of this reward a few minutes beforehand indicates that money, for Dupin, is a relative non-factor. Additionally, despite Dupin's expression of disgust with the Minister, and noticeable pleasure with his downfall, the tardied position in the story of these sentiments' revelations suggests that the seeking of political revenge, too, is somewhat perfunctory. For the legendary sleuth, all purposes are secondary to the stimulation of the mind. This is disseminated most explicitly not in "The Purloined Letter", but at the onset of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue", when the narrator identifies Dupin's capabilities for analysis as "being a source of the liveliest enjoyment", and speaks of the detective as one who "derives pleasure from even the most trivial occupations bringing his talent into play" (Poe 179). In the latter half of "The Purloined Letter", Dupin articulates his own definition of intellect, which consists of two closely-related elements – empathy and dualism. Dupin alludes to the first in his criticism of the Prefect's analytical abilities. He notes that G— and his men are always foiled when the cunning of the criminal "is above their own, and very usually when it is below" (Poe 262), suggesting that ingenuity must be compounded with adaptability to yield any useful end. The detective drives his point home by contrasting the Prefect with a schoolboy acquaintance playing the game "even or odd". The schoolboy's mastery at the game, Dupin leads the narrator to conclude, is driven by a proclivity

for identifying his own intellect “with that of the opponent” (Poe 261). Crucially, however, this identification is not confined to the mind, but is one of a physical nature as well. The schoolboy’s method is to fashion his facial expression to match that of the opponent’s, and then wait “to see what thoughts or sentiments arise” in his “mind or heart, as if to match or correspond with the expression” (Poe 261). According to Dupin, achieving the highest level of intellect requires a dualistic worldview, in which both mind and body are called into action.

By fulfilling his ideals of intellect, Dupin succeeds where G— fails, besting both him and the Minister in a three-way battle of masculine wit. Dupin proceeds by logical deduction in pinpointing the location of the purloined letter, but is able to step outside this framework at the right moments due to his dualistic methods. While the functionary cannot fathom the possibility that the letter may be hidden in plain sight, the detective leans on his creativity, developed in part through years of writing doggerel, to achieve empathy with the Minister. This empathy, in turn, leads Dupin to reflect that D— “could not be so weak as not to see that the most intricate and remote recess of his hotel would be as open as his commonest closets to the eyes of the Prefect” (Poe 265), and to correctly consider “a trumpery filigree card-rack”(Poe 266) as the location of the stolen letter. The end result of Dupin’s empathetic, bi-part reasoning is to emasculate both the Prefect and the Minister. The Prefect rushes out “unceremoniously” upon collecting the letter from Dupin, which he grasps with a “perfect agony of joy” (Poe 260). In this moment, uncontrollably shaking and stunned into speechlessness, G—’s rational, level-headed ideals of masculinity have crumbled. He may be able to convince the queen otherwise, and a large cash reward seems to lie in his future, but in his heart of hearts, he knows that his scientific methods have failed him. A male savior he is not – it is he himself who needed saving. Meanwhile, Dupin’s recovery of the letter inverts the power dynamics between the Minister and the queen.

The detective concludes that the queen “has now” in her power the Minister, who will “inevitably commit himself, at once, to his political destruction” (Poe 268). The domineering, unscrupulous D— of the opening act has been reduced to extreme vulnerability, his manly worth and status all but evaporated.

In “The Purloined Letter”, Poe has built up three competing notions of masculine power – the aggressive feudalism of the Minister, the haughty rationalism of the Prefect, and the dualistic intellectualism of Dupin. The first two are exposed as illusory and unreliable. They are not only annihilated by the story’s end, but also revealed to be inherently tied to transient materiality through the symbol of the letter. The Minister enjoys the privileges of subjugating the queen and enforcing his political will only as long as he possesses the letter – “with the employment”, the narrator observes, “the power departs” (Poe 256). Similarly, for G—, collecting the reward and playing the role of savior to the queen requires him to have the letter in hand. For Dupin, however, the exercise of intellectual power transcends the realm of the material. The letter holds little significance to him; he is happy to part with the letter as soon as the Prefect arrives.

Dupin’s dualistic intellect is given a further spiritual dimension by his relative detachment towards women. He does confess to being a “partisan of the lady concerned” (Poe 268) at the end, but this can best be regarded as an expression of a layman’s political leaning, rather than a Prefect-like desire to come to the queen’s rescue, given the way in which the detective’s lifestyle is described. In “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”, Dupin and the narrator come to cohabit a “grotesque mansion”. They live together in “perfect” seclusion, under the cover of perpetual darkness (Poe 182). This same arrangement continues in “The Purloined Letter”, which opens with the two men “sitting in the dark”, in a “profound silence” (Poe 253).

The obvious homoerotic undertones aside, we can be confident that women do not occupy a large part of the detective's thoughts. The ideal man, then, Poe seems to be arguing, does not only exhibit an empathetic, dualistic intellect, but an ability to transcend worldly and womanly attachments. True masculine power does not seek to make itself known. The victor of the intellectual duel in "The Purloined Letter" stands tall, not so much for the voracity of his ambitions, but for his fidelity to principles, and his unwillingness to be carried away by the temptations of a corrupt and avaricious society.

**Works Cited:**

Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Purloined Letter." *Essential Tales and Poems*, edited by Stefan Dziemianowicz, Barnes & Noble, 2012, pp. 253-268.

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