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Source: *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol. 64, No. 3 (December 2009), pp. 323-346

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/ncl.2009.64.3.323>

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“The Purloined Letter” in the Gift Book: Reading Poe in a Contemporary Context

ALEXANDRA URAKOVA

FRAMING Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Purloined Letter” (1844) was a fashionable intellectual practice in the 1970s and 1980s, inspired mostly by Jacques Lacan’s “Le Séminaire sur ‘La lettre volée’” (1956).¹ In 1975 Jacques Derrida, accusing Lacan of having excluded the textual fiction from its frame, accordingly “replaced” the tale in Poe’s detective trilogy “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841), “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” (1842–43), and “The Purloined Letter.”² Barbara Johnson reconstructed

Nineteenth-Century Literature, Vol. 64, No. 3, pp. 323–346. ISSN: 0891–9356, online ISSN: 1067–8352. © 2009 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press’s Rights and Permissions website, at <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals/rights.htm>.

¹ See Lacan, “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida and Psychoanalytic Reading*, ed. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1988), pp. 28–54 (originally published 1956). The first version of the present essay was presented as a lecture to faculty and graduate students at the English Department, University of Virginia, on 18 January 2008. I am grateful to Stephen Railton for his assistance.

² See Derrida, “The Purveyor of Truth,” trans. Alan Bass, in *The Purloined Poe*, pp. 173–212 (originally published 1975). Derrida famously stresses: “the framing of the frames, the interminable supplementarity of the quotation marks, the insertion of ‘The Purloined Letter’ into a purloined letter beginning before it, through the narratives of narratives in ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue,’ and the newspaper clippings in ‘The Mystery of Marie Rogêt’ (A Sequel to ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’)” (“Purveyor of Truth,” p. 204).

a broader frame of reference, reading the tale together with Prosper-Jolyet de Crebillon's *Atrée et Thyeste* (1707) overtly and Shakespeare's *Macbeth* covertly alluded to in Poe's tale.³ John T. Irwin pushed the frame forward by rereading Jorge Luis Borges rereading "The Purloined Letter."⁴ And finally, Joseph N. Riddel made Poe's tale both a metonymical and an allegorical figure of nineteenth-century American literary practice.⁵ While suggesting yet another possible "frame of reference," I do not intend to reanimate or follow the famous poststructuralist debate, nor to build on a new interpretation of the tale's logical structure. By returning Poe's tale to *The Gift: A Christmas, New Year, and Birthday Present, 1845* (1844), the gift book where it was first printed, I explore in this essay the relation of the story to its apparently arbitrary periodical framing. Further, I discuss the connection of "The Purloined Letter" to the economy of the gift book, showing how the heterosexual commerce of commodified seduction implied by the mainstream stories in gift books finally leads up to the homosocial erotics in Poe's tale.⁶

³ See Johnson, "The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida," in *The Purloined Poe*, pp. 213–51 (originally published 1977). What is more, Johnson highlights the repetition of the fatal-letter plot in both alluded works: "And what is Lady Macbeth doing when we first catch sight of her? She is reading a letter. Not a purloined letter, perhaps, but one that contains the ambiguous letter of destiny, committing Macbeth to the murder of the King, whose place Macbeth will take and whose fate he will inevitably share. Kings seem to be unable to remain unscathed in the face of a letter—Atreus betrayed by his wife's letter to his brother; Duncan betrayed by Macbeth's letter to Lady Macbeth; Macbeth himself betrayed by his own confidence in his ability to read the letter of his Fate; and of course, the King in 'The Purloined Letter,' whose power is betrayed by his not even knowing about the existence of the letter that betrays him" ("Frame of Reference," p. 236).

⁴ See Irwin, "Mysteries We Reread, Mysteries of Rereading: Poe, Borges, and the Analytic Detective Story; Also Lacan, Derrida, and Johnson," *MLN*, 101 (1986), 1,168–1,215.

⁵ See Riddel, *The Purloined Letters: Originality and Repetition in American Literature*, ed. Mark Bauerlein (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1995).

⁶ In using the term "homosocial" I refer to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1985), where it was introduced for the first time. I would like to thank H. Aram Veerer for his insightful suggestions concerning this subject. The implicit homoerotic meanings of Poe's tales are discussed in Leland S. Person, "Queer Poe: The Tell-Tale Heart of His Fiction," *Poe Studies*, 41 (2008), 7–30.

“The Purloined Letter” was published in *The Gift*, a popular Philadelphia annual or gift book, in September 1844.⁷ Later it was revised by Poe for the 1845 Wiley and Putnam edition of the *Tales*, and Poe made additional changes to the text in his own copy of the *Tales*, known as the J. Lorimer Graham copy, in 1849. This final revision has become a now-canonical version of the tale included in works and anthologies of Poe’s fiction.⁸ “The Purloined Letter” was also immediately reprinted from *The Gift* in *Chambers’ Edinburgh Journal* in 1844, but the *Chambers’* reprint, copied in turn by a number of American periodicals, was excessively abridged and unauthorized.⁹ The publication in *The Gift* thus is not just the first but also the only authorized periodical version of the tale.

Poe’s story appears in *The Gift* volume together with two tales contributed by well-published authors, Caroline Kirkland and Nathaniel Parker Willis. Kirkland’s “The Schoolmaster’s Progress” is a story about love letters being stolen, concealed, and finally discovered; in Willis’s “The Power of an ‘Injured Look’” a letter ruins, although temporarily, a politician’s career.¹⁰ It is

⁷ See Edgar A. Poe, “The Purloined Letter,” in *The Gift: A Christmas, New Year, and Birthday Present, 1845* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1844), pp. 41–61. Further references to “The Purloined Letter” are to this edition and appear in the text. Although this volume of *The Gift* was published in 1844, it was sold away for the year that followed. Further in the essay I refer to the year of issue of this and other editions of gift books. In the footnotes I indicate both dates.

⁸ See Thomas Olive Mabbott, textual notes for “The Purloined Letter,” in *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Mabbott, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1978), III, 973–74. Mabbott also mentions the version that appeared in *The Works of the Late Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Rufus W. Griswold (1850–56), which he describes as “merely a reprint of an unrevised copy of the *Tales*” with “no independent authority.”

⁹ The *Chambers’* version was copied by *Littell’s Living Age*, a Bostonian magazine that specialized in unauthorized reprints from foreign periodicals (18 January 1845); by the Philadelphia *Spirit of the Times* (20 and 22 January 1845); and by the *New York Weekly News* (25 January 1845). See Mabbott’s notes in *Collected Works*, III, 974.

¹⁰ See [Caroline] Kirkland, “The Schoolmaster’s Progress,” in *The Gift* (1845 [1844]), pp. 10–25; and N. P. Willis, “The Power of an ‘Injured Look,’” in *The Gift* (1845 [1844]), pp. 28–37. The three tales are published in sequence (“The Schoolmaster’s Progress,” “The Power of an ‘Injured Look,’” and “The Purloined Letter”) intermingled with a couple of poetical pieces and a plate. While I propose to read together the “neighboring” works, there is an example of reading together the “narratives” of two neighboring authors, Poe and Frederick Douglass, who lived “only a few blocks from each other” in Baltimore in the early 1830s. See J. Gerald Kennedy, “‘Trust No Man’: Poe, Douglass, and the Culture of Slavery,” in *Romancing the Shadow: Poe and Race*, ed. J. Gerald Kennedy and Liliane Weissberg (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001), p. 225.

not hard to recognize the storylines corresponding with Poe's tale—a purloined letter, a letter as an instrument of political manipulation. Thematically organizing the annual's materials was not an uncommon editorial practice in *The Gift*. At the same time, these two tales, while forming a rather spontaneous, accidental trilogy with “The Purloined Letter,” were different in their style and genre. Kirkland's tale is a humorous “frontier” story and a love story with a happy ending, and “The Power of an ‘Injured Look’” is a political satire, while Poe's “The Purloined Letter” is an early sample of detective genre and is itself a sequel to the two Dupin tales.¹¹ Yet the very fact that these tales with a common subject matter appear under the cover of the same annual makes it tempting to examine their possible interrelations.

“The Schoolmaster's Progress” is a story about fake correspondence. Miss Harriet Bangle, a snobbish Easterner visiting a small western village, decides to punish Master William Horner for his indifference to her. She starts sending him love letters on behalf of his beautiful student Ellen Kingsbury, whom he is secretly attached to. The idea of tricking the teacher occurs to Miss Bangle at the public spelling-school, where Horner himself is trying “by tricks to put down those [students] whom he cannot overcome in fair fight” (“The Schoolmaster's Progress,” p. 16). The trick that originated from the spelling exam in turn resembles a spelling exercise. The seriousness of Horner's attachment to the imaginary correspondent improves his style, giving “both grace and dignity to his once awkward diction” (p. 19). As Miss Bangle perceives, she “herself had turned schoolmistress,” and Master Horner, “instead of being merely her dupe, had become her pupil too” (p. 19). When the poor teacher attempts to talk with Ellen about their secret correspondence, he causes

¹¹ Poe mentions both “the affair of the Rue Morgue” and “the murder of Marie Rogêt” at the beginning of “The Purloined Letter” (“The Purloined Letter,” p. 41). Further, as Amy Gilman Srebnick suggests, there could be an even closer relation of “The Purloined Letter” to “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt.” According to Srebnick, Poe, by quoting Crebillon's *Atrée et Thyeste*, pointed to William Attree, the crime reporter for *The New York Herald* who had “created” the Mary Rogers story, which implies another possible set of references. See Amy Gilman Srebnick, *The Mysterious Death of Mary Rogers: Sex and Culture in Nineteenth-Century New York* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), pp. 123–24.

a scandal with her father and other villagers involved. His only testimony, the letters kept in a “precious parcel” (p. 24) and locked in his desk, disappear. As it turns out, Miss Bangle and her mate unlocked the desk with the help of a crooked nail and purloined the parcel. But Miss Bangle is finally herself betrayed by her mate, who steals the letters for his own purposes. At the end of the story the letters are accidentally discovered during a school performance, the deceiver is exposed, and Horner is justified and rewarded by Miss Kingsbury’s benevolence.

It is not hard to see that a similar role-exchange structure, inherited from classical rhetorical tradition, is perfected in the famous “round robin” plot in Poe’s “The Purloined Letter”: the Queen duping the King is duped by the Minister D—, who is in turn duped by Dupin. What distinguishes Poe’s plot, though, is its merely functional appropriation free from didactic overtones, not to mention the symmetrical character of the plot based on repetition. The motif of fake correspondence is also implied in Poe’s tale, as the letter found in D—’s apartment is “addressed, in a diminutive female hand, to D—, the minister, himself” (“The Purloined Letter,” p. 58). Concealing the letter, D— readdresses and reseals it, forging a correspondence of an obviously intimate nature between himself and a fabricated female addressee. What betrays the Minister among other things is the soiled and torn condition of the paper, “so inconsistent with the *true* methodical habits of D—” (p. 59), as Dupin observes, and with a customary way of keeping love correspondence, as one might guess (as in the “precious parcel” where Master Horner keeps his letters locked in “The Schoolmaster’s Progress”). In Poe’s tale the letter’s disposition is by no means evident, but it is evident just enough for Dupin to figure it out. A man such as D— would not hide the document of extreme importance inside a chair or under the carpet as the Prefect expects, but neither would he keep a love letter, even unimportant and worthless, in such a suggestively careless way.

The plot of “The Power of an ‘Injured Look’” corresponds with another aspect of Poe’s tale: a letter as a vehicle of political destruction. Willis’s tale is not as much about the letter(s) as Kirkland’s and Poe’s tales are. It is plotted around the heroine’s natural gift of exciting popular sympathy and pity (her “injured

look”), which the narrator reads “in the lowering pupil of her eye” (“Power of an ‘Injured Look,’” p. 33) and which remains unnoticed by her fiancé and then a husband, McRueit, who claims to be a connoisseur of human nature. The narrator shares this secret with McRueit’s political enemy, Mr. Develin, and also tells him about a widow named “Wanmaker,” whose courtship cost the politician a place in Saratoga because his wife’s “look” turned public opinion against him. Develin, having checked the spelling of the widow’s last name, sends Mrs. McRueit a letter the very day her husband is making his electoral speech. We can only guess what the fatal letter is about, but its message, translated by Mrs. McRueit’s injured look, leaves no doubt to the whole electorate that the husband is guilty of treason. The attention of the audience is drawn from the speaker’s lips to his wife’s eyes and to a large placard with the words “injured wife,” “unfaithful husband,” and “Widow W-n-k-r” written in capital letters (p. 36).¹² McRueit loses at the election but learns a lesson. He understands that “he felt overmastered by the key she [Mrs. McRueit] had to popular sympathy” and manages “to make it turn in his favour” (“Power of an ‘Injured Look,’” p. 37). “Readdressing” the message of her eloquent look, McRueit eventually becomes a very powerful person in the government.

In Poe’s tale the facsimile of the purloined letter left to the Minister by Dupin also foreshadows Dupin’s future downfall. D—’s political destruction appears somehow more menacing and disturbing than McRueit’s fate, not the least because the political exposure itself is suspended, put off. And still the similar structure is reenacted in “The Purloined Letter”: the letter passing from the Queen to D—, from D— to Dupin, and finally from Dupin back to the Queen is in turn empowering and disempowering its holders.

The type of relations between the tales can best be explained by the term “artistic ensemble,” suggested by Yuri Lotman, where

¹² It is fascinating to read Dupin’s famous, often-quoted statement in this context: “A novice in the game [the game of puzzles] generally seeks to embarrass his opponents by giving them the most minutely lettered names; but the adept selects such words as stretch, in large characters, from one end of the chart to the other. These, like the over-largely lettered signs and placards of the street, escape observation by dint of being excessively obvious” (“The Purloined Letter,” p. 57).

texts in the same periodical, though different in style, design, and school, form “a kind of unity in the consciousness of the contemporaries hard for us to understand today.”¹³ Undoubtedly the same subject matter can be found in many other periodical pieces of the time. Still, semantic patterns repeated in each of the three tales in *The Gift* give an idea of the basic expectations of the annual’s reader. Deceiver is duped, untruthful husband punished though not destroyed. A fake correspondent is unmasked, as happens in “The Schoolmaster’s Progress,” but it also occurs in “The Purloined Letter,” where the Minister’s readdressing and resealing the letter, his invention of a non-existent addressee, serves as a clue to the mystery. In each tale the reader’s attention is focused not so much on the content of the letter as on its displacements, which eventually constitute the plot. A letter becomes a public message metonymically displaced by Mrs. McRueit’s injured look. A missing “parcel” or a “glove” turned inside out, the letters figure as material items, objects of loss and desire. Poe brings the letter’s materiality to its logical extreme, as its content is a semantic gap playing no significant role in the power structure of the tale. The itinerary of the letter or letters keeping the reader’s interest throughout the narrative is again predictable. The schoolmaster not only gets his letters back but also gains Ellen’s heart, the tale thus following the triumph-of-love pattern. Mrs. McRueit teaches her husband a lesson, and his final repossession of her secret “power” ironically reaffirms matrimonial values. It is not surprising in this context that Dupin, “a partisan of the lady” as he calls himself (“The Purloined Letter,” p. 60), eventually returns the letter to the Queen, restores her power, and saves her reputation. Poe’s tale seems to be perfectly fitted in its gift book framing.

¹³ See Lotman, “Hudozhestvenni ansambl’ kak bitovoe prostranstvo” [Artistic Ensemble as Domestic Space], in Yuri Lotman, *Ob iskusstve* (Sankt-Peterburg: Iskusstvo-SPB, 2005), p. 581 (originally published 1974). In his turn, Cary Nelson suggests that periodicals should be read as texts that have a unity different from but comparable to that of individual books (see Nelson, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910–1945* [Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1989], p. 219). On the emerging field of periodical studies, which examines magazines and newspapers as “rich, dialogic texts” creating “often surprising and even bewildering points of contact between disparate areas of human activity,” see Sean Latham and Robert Scholes, “The Rise of Periodical Studies,” *PMLA*, 121 (2006), 517–53, 528.

The typical gift book reader I am referring to is a (usually) middle- or upper-class female well read in the sentimental, entertaining, and didactic fiction of contemporary periodicals. Yet the relation of Poe's tale to its "frame" cannot be explained without considering the specifics of the annual itself, a medium that was defining both editorial politics and reading practices to no lesser degree than the literary market in general. Therefore, I find it important for my purposes to mark some of the distinguishing features of the gift book.



The Gift: A Christmas and New Year's Present

was one of the numerous literary annuals that burst into the American print market in the 1830s and 1840s under such names as *Souvenir*, *Offering*, *Token of Affection*, *Forget Me Not*, *Violet*, *Snow-Drops*, and the like. According to Ralph Thompson, *The Gift* was the "most ambitious undertaking" of the Carey and Hart publishing house "in the gift book field."¹⁴ There were eight volumes in total issued from 1833 to 1845, which included works by Poe, Washington Irving, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Willis, Kirkland, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Catherine Maria Sedgwick, Lydia Sigourney, and William Burton, not to mention illustrations by Thomas Sully. The often high quality of literary materials and engravings notwithstanding, *The Gift* was still representative of the literary annuals of its type.

To begin with, a gift book was not just a periodical: it was also an expensive present and object of luxury, an exquisite artifact. Engravings played an even more important role in gift books than in other periodical editions. As one of the leading engravers of the time, John Sartain, stated in 1849: "Now an annual is bought to look at. No one ever thinks of reading them."¹⁵ One might suggest that the plates were not as often cut out from

¹⁴ See Thompson, *American Literary Annuals and Gift Books, 1825–1865* (New York: H. W. Wilson Co., 1936), p. 74.

¹⁵ John Sartain, *Sartain's Magazine*, 1 (1849); quoted in Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines, 1741–1850* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1930), p. 421.

annuals as, say, famous fashion plates were cut from *Godey's Lady's Book*. The relevance of the gift book's integrity is suggested by the evidences of the way in which it was usually kept. Thompson writes: “For nearly a generation the resplendent gift book was among the most treasured of personal belongings. Unlike other volumes, it was not, once read, forgotten. Thruout the year it lay upon the parlor table, an ornament awaiting re-examination in an idle hour” (*American Literary Annuals and Gift Books*, pp. 1–2). In her tale “The Souvenir,” itself published in *Affection's Gift* in 1832, Eliza Leslie describes her heroine receiving “the elegant souvenir” of a gift book as a present:

She spread a clean handkerchief over her lap before she drew the book from its case, that it might not be soiled in the slightest degree, and she removed to a distance from the fire lest the cover should be warped by the heat. After she had eagerly looked all through it, she commenced again, and examined the plates with the most minute attention. She then showed them to her little brother and sister.¹⁶

This fragment emphasizes two important aspects: first, reading is eventually replaced by looking and showing; and second, the exaggerated care stresses the souvenir's economic and symbolic value. While lady's magazines were bought mostly with a purpose to clip and collect fashion plates, gift books were purchased to be given as presents to keep.¹⁷

The practice of giving gift books as presents defined “the asymmetrical conditions of gift book circulation,” which situated them “at a pivot point between economic and affective systems of exchange,” in the words of Meredith L. McGill.¹⁸ According to McGill, “As they pass from purchaser to receiver, suitor to

¹⁶ E[liza] L[eslie], “The Souvenir” (1832), quoted in Thompson, *American Literary Annuals and Gift Books*, p. 2.

¹⁷ James D. Hart, also stating that “the gift book was clearly understood to be ornament,” estimates that “publishers generally spent three times as much on the so-called embellishments as on the printed matter and twice as much again on the bindings of watered silk, flamboyantly stamped gilding, embossed leather, or varnished papier-mâché with inlaid mother-of-pearl” (Hart, *The Popular Book: A History of America's Literary Taste* [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1950], p. 89).

¹⁸ See McGill, *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834–1853* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), p. 34.

woman sought, gift books also need to be transformed from mass-produced commodities into another kind of currency, ‘tokens of affection’ that will be rewarded by a return of the same” (*American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting*, p. 34). The gift book’s role in the courtship process was, indeed, significant.¹⁹ A book was one of the very few presents (along with “a bouquet,” “one or two autographs of distinguished persons,” and “a few relics or mementos of memorable places”) that were acceptable for a lady to receive from a gentleman, as Eliza Leslie’s *Behaviour Book: A Guide and Manual for Ladies* of 1851 insists.²⁰ Leslie was herself editor of a number of gift books, including the first four volumes of *The Gift*.

It is not surprising, then, that a gift book more or less explicitly reminded the reader of its functional, gift-related character. In *The Gift* volume for 1837 (issued in 1836) we find a poem of the same name by N. C. Brooks, the editor of the gift book *Amethyst*. The poet speaks rather loosely of his name inscribed on “the tablet of a female heart,” as the token of faith and friendship emphasizes the word “Gift.”²¹ An even better example is from another of Miss Leslie’s annuals, *The Violet: A Christmas and New Year’s Gift, or Birth-day Present*. The volume of *The Violet* published in 1838 opens with a poem called “The Blossom Spirit” by Mrs. C. E. Goosh, praising a violet, which is baptized as “Forget-me-not” by the King of flowers:

I give—the name Forget-me-not
Be thine,—and henceforth thou shalt be
The symbol dear to memory.²²

¹⁹ Although of course it could have been given as a family present as well. The inscription on the blank page of the copy of *The Gift* volume for 1845 (1844) at the Small Special Collections Library, the University of Virginia, for example, reads: “Presented to Mary A. Coleman Dec. 25, 1844, by her Father.”

²⁰ See [Eliza] Leslie, *Miss Leslie’s Behaviour Book: A Guide and Manual for Ladies* (1851; 1859 ed., rpt. New York: Arno Press, 1972), p. 181.

²¹ He writes: “How bless’d my lot! could I remain / Engraven on thy breast and brain, / And Friendship bid my memory stay, / When all beside has passed away,— / And this fair GIFT a token be / Of faith, and friendship felt for thee” (N. C. Brooks, “The Gift,” in *The Gift: A Christmas and New Year’s Present for 1837*, ed. [Eliza] Leslie [Philadelphia: E. L. Cary and A. Hart, 1836], p. 325).

²² C. E. Goosh, “The Blossom Spirit,” in *The Violet: A Christmas and New Year’s Gift, or Birth-day Present* (1839 [1838]), p. 21.

“Forget-me-not” is not just a symbol of memory but, more important, the name of a famous and fashionable British gift book (the gift book vogue came to the United States from Great Britain, where it was in its zenith in the 1810s and 1820s). The poem, indeed, assumes illocutionary, initiating power. Further, nearly every tale in the volume has something to do with either flowers or holidays, as the titles “The Rose Bud in Autumn,” “Drops of Water and Prisms,” “The Holiday,” “The Birth-day Ball,” “The New-Year Gifts,” and the like suggest.²³ The annual does not let a reader forget for a moment that she is holding a birthday or New Year’s present, or at least a token of affection, a souvenir and forget-me-not.²⁴

The above-mentioned distinguishing features of a gift book—its integrity, ornamental character, and currency in the libidinal exchange—more or less explicitly acknowledged, indeed defined, the way in which certain gift book tales were meant to be read. One would think of holiday tales, tales with a gift-giving motif, and stories about the exchange of affection tokens in general. Poe’s “The Purloined Letter” obviously does not fit any of these categories, yet in order to specify its place in *The Gift* and its relation to the annual’s economy, I find it relevant to read Poe’s tale against the background of the works expressing the gift book’s underlying ideology. Thus, I propose to “broaden”

²³ The violet color of the prism in the story “Drops of Water and Prisms” (*The Violet* [1839 (1838)], 72–93) by Maria Griffith bluntly refers to Eliza Leslie’s “beautiful little souvenir” “called the VIOLET” (p. 76). The title of the story itself points at the gift book tradition in general (i.e., a gift book titled *Snow-Drops*).

²⁴ Two other examples of the gift-volume’s self-referential character can be taken from *The Gift* for 1836 (published in 1835) and *The Gift* for 1845 (1844). In *The Gift* for 1836 there is an engraving titled “Fanny Kemble” by J. Cheney, taken from Thomas Sully’s 1834 painting (on the title facing page of the gift book), and a poem by C. W. Thomson titled “On a Female Head by Sully.” The poet narrating the story of the lady painted by Sully says: “Her dreams are full of hope and love,” “For he, the loved one far away, / Has sent his message sweet” (Thomson, “On a Female Head by Sully,” in *The Gift: A Christmas and New Year’s Present for 1836*, ed. [Eliza] Leslie [Philadelphia: E. L. Carey and A. Hart, (1835)], p. 183). The other example is even more interesting in our case. C. R. Leslie’s plate, coming in *The Gift* for 1845 just before Poe’s “The Purloined Letter,” shows a girl looking at a necklace that she has just taken from a parcel. The plate poem by Anne C. Lynch called “The Necklace” leaves no doubt that the necklace is not a sign of vanity but a “talisman,” “Love’s own amulet” (Lynch, “The Necklace,” in *The Gift* [1845 (1844)], p. 40).

our frame of reference and to discuss two other tales of *The Gift* that I see as representative of the annual's politics.

One of these tales, "The Old Valentine," in *The Gift* for 1839 (published in 1838), was contributed by Maria Griffith, a popular gift book author.²⁵ The title gives it away as a "holiday" tale, and there is little doubt that "The Old Valentine" was written especially for the annual. The tale's heroine, Sophia Lee, receives a valentine that she believes was written by Mr. Samuel Day, her aunt's accountant. But Mr. Day is a serious "man of business" who would not very likely send a valentine to express his feelings and who besides looks too calm and self-conscious for a secret admirer. Sophia carefully examines the letter, musing: "there is some mystery about this—pray, when did he write it? it must have been lately, for here is 1837, and yet—stay—I declare there has been an erasure, for I see the top part of a 6 or 5 above the 7, and look here, too, *Gift* is in paler ink: a word has been scratched out there. It never struck me before, but the paper is not as white as the envelope" ("The Old Valentine," p. 50). The word that is scratched out is, one would guess, the name of the addressee. As it finally turns out, Mr. Day wrote this valentine at the request of their mutual friend, who had bad handwriting. Thus, he was writing it "mechanically, without considering the import of the words at all" (p. 57). But this fact does not seem to matter. "We do not care for the rhyme nor for the design, you know, it is the pleasant feeling that these little bits of paper give one," Sophia tells her girlfriends (p. 45), who got the valentines which she herself cut, painted, and wrote, doing a favor for the same friend. Thanks to the "dear little paper" (p. 57), Mr. Day and Sophia reveal their feelings to each other, not accidentally on Sophia's birthday.

The letter thus assumes meaning and value only when it becomes a token of true affection, a sign of secret attachment. "The Old Valentine" is indeed emblematic. The valentine serves as a perfect substitute for *The Gift* as a volume, as a valentine is already itself something in-between a love letter and a present. *The Gift*, very much like the valentine, is compiled and designed

²⁵ See M[aria] Griffith, "The Old Valentine," in *The Gift: A Christmas and New Year's Present for 1839*, ed. [Eliza] Leslie (Philadelphia: E. L. Carey and A. Hart, 1838), pp. 44–58.

for nobody in particular. The name that is left blank in *The Gift*, like the one scratched out in Sophia’s letter, needs to be filled in, in each individual case. The true addressee of the valentine—true of course in a supreme, symbolic sense—is finally discovered. *The Gift*, indeed, functions in very much the same way, converting depersonalized economic relations of seller-buyer into personalized affective bonds of sender-receiver.

The other tale that I will discuss in the same context is “The Unpresuming Mr. Hudson” by Catherine Maria Sedgwick, printed in *The Gift* for 1836 (issued in 1835).²⁶ Sedgwick, according to Thompson, was “one of the most admired of gift book writers” (*American Literary Annuals and Gift Books*, p. 22); she published also in Philadelphia’s *Atlantic Souvenir* and Boston’s *The Token*, among others. Her tale opens this volume of *The Gift*, its place thus indicating the tale’s and the author’s significance. Sedgwick’s tale, unlike the happy-ending narrative of Maria Griffith, is rather a didactic story with a moral, “meditating upon the trials of a pretty young girl who is chaperoned to watering-places by a silly, expecting, and credulous mother” (“The Unpresuming Mr. Hudson,” p. 38).

The story’s heroine, Louise Campbell, traveling with her mother in a stagecoach to the Springs, is courted by the gentlemen who accompany them—with the exception of one Mr. Hudson. He is the only member of the group who does not give the flowers he has collected to Louise. Louise’s mother is more willing to “read” Hudson’s indifference as the sign of his shyness concealing a secret attachment. Hudson remains equally “unpresuming” during the whole time they spend together on a steamboat. And yet on the day of departure Louise, going to her cabin in search of something she has left behind, finds there “a book neatly enveloped in white paper, on which was written in pencil, ‘*To L. C. from C. H.*’ and under it the trite of quotation from the text-book of lovers, ‘The world is divided into two parts—that where she is, and that where she is not’” (“The Unpresuming Mr. Hudson,” p. 35). The heroine unbinds the envelope’s blue ribbon “with a fluttering hand”: “It was a blank album, with flowers pressed

²⁶ See [Catherine Maria] Sedgwick, “The Unpresuming Mr. Hudson,” in *The Gift* (1836 [1835]), pp. 2–38.

between its leaves, the very flowers that the ‘unpresuming Mr. Hudson’ had not the courage to offer to Louise on the first day of their acquaintance. Here they were embalmed by love and poetry; for on each page was pencilled a quoted stanza from some popular amorous poet” (p. 35). Yet Louise misreads both the flower language and the envelope’s address. The initials “C. H.” are correctly deciphered as “Charles Hudson.” But “L. C.” is not Louise Campbell, it is her former schoolmate Laura Clay, who has just arrived at the same cabin and who presents herself as Hudson’s fiancée. When the real addressee is found out, the narrator, Louise’s elderly female companion, secretly restores the album “to its right place” (p. 38). Louise’s imagination stirred up by her mother’s ambitions therefore betrays her. She does not guess that the address written on the envelope may be the wrong one, assuming that “L. C.” can have only one signified, that is herself. “L. C.” instead could ideally make an infinite number of combinations and be nearly anybody at all, in the same way that earlier, in the conversation with Louise’s mother, it turns out that Hudson does not belong to the Hudsons of Boston or of Baltimore or of New York.

The album in “The Unpresuming Mr. Hudson,” like the valentine in the story by Maria Griffith, functions as a gift book’s double. Many familial, handwritten albums were bound in the gift book style and were even entitled “Casket of Thoughts” or “Token of Affection” (see Thompson, *American Literary Annuals and Gift Books*, p. 20). Like gift books, as Kevin J. Hayes reminds us, “albums were often given as holiday presents.”²⁷ Thompson counts “at least fifty” annuals “dealing with flowers and flower-language,” “appropriately named ‘Flora’s Album,’ ‘Flora’s Dial,’ ‘Flora’s Interpreter,’ ‘Floral Keepsake,’ ‘Poetry of Flowers,’ or ‘Flower Garden’” (*American Literary Annuals and Gift Books*, p. 17). As in “The Old Valentine,” the addressee’s name in “The Unpresuming Mr. Hudson” remains unknown (and misleading) until the end; it is not scratched out but ciphered in the initials, a common way of signing love messages as well as poems in the periodicals, including *The Gift*. The flowers in the album have a special meaning for Louise (*those* flowers that were collected by

²⁷ Hayes, *Poe and the Printed Word* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), p. 21.

Hudson on the day of their acquaintance). Yet they are not *the* flowers but just flowers speaking a universal language of love, like the quotation on the envelope labeled as "trite." And still, what causes disappointment to Louise Campbell gives "a pleasant feeling" to her substitute, Laura Clay, proving to Laura as well as to the readers the love and truthfulness of her fiancé. Louise was determined that "the flowers should not fail to their destination" ("The Unpresuming Mr. Hudson," p. 24), and they did not. Sedgwick's didactic tale restages the same plot pattern as does Griffith's valentine story: the itinerary of the flower album corresponds to the libidinal nature of a gift book circulation.



Returning to Poe's tale, we can see that *The Gift's* reader would, indeed, expect Dupin to scrutinize the letter, noting the minute details with almost feminine attentiveness, and to decipher correctly the letter's address. Indeed, Sophia's examination of the valentine strikingly resembles Dupin's detection of the purloined letter's material form. The color of the paper proves to Sophia that the valentine was written much earlier than it was sent; "the soiled and torn condition of the paper" makes Dupin suspect D——'s intentional "design to delude the beholder into an idea of the worthlessness of the document" ("The Purloined Letter," p. 59). The Prefect, instead, very much like Louise, reads the clues too straightforwardly, expecting the signifier to coincide with the signified and thus looking for the letter "with the ducal arms of S—— family" (p. 59). The excessive materiality of the letter in Poe's story is again explicable in the context of the annual, which overemphasizes the value of its ornaments and plates and where the literary works often refer back to the book's physical form. At the same time, the letter like the gift book is not only the *thing* but a *sign*, in the words of Ora Avni, functioning in the text as a pure signifier and a variable object of exchange.²⁸ As mentioned earlier, the final arrival of the letter to the Queen, its real addressee and owner, seems to

²⁸ See Avni, "The Semiotics of Transactions: Mauss, Lacan and *The Three Musketeers*," trans. John Rosenthal, *MLN*, 100 (1985), 728–57.

be a matter of fact. Yet the tale's plot, apparently in tune with the symbolic itinerary of *The Gift's* letters and parcels, does not fit so easily in the annual's ideological pattern.

Dupin does return the letter to the Queen via the Prefect. But he does not *give* the letter, he asks the Prefect to write him a check. Before that, he rather cynically tells the Prefect "the story . . . of Abernethy": a rich miser wants to get a medical opinion of a famous physician for free, and the physician, Abernethy, not willing to be duped, advises him to "take *advice*" ("The Purloined Letter," p. 50). The Prefect understands the hint and offers fifty thousand francs. In *The Gift's* version this is even stressed: "I would *really* give fifty thousand francs, every *centime* of it, to any one who would aid me in the matter!" (p. 50) (in later revisions "every *centime* of it," with the word *centime* emphasized, is omitted).²⁹ "In that case," replied Dupin, opening a drawer, and producing a check-book, "you may as well fill me up a check for the amount mentioned. When you have signed it, I will hand you the letter" ("The Purloined Letter," p. 50). The checkbook thus comes before the letter.

The giving-a-letter-(a book)-as-a-gift motif in the tales, as discussed earlier, is indeed a disguise of the real economic relations between the annual and its readers. Gift books circulated in the market as commercial projects, and it was part of this project to make their readers forget that fact. The discrepancy between a book, with its average price of three and a half dollars, and a gift of affective nature was noticeable. Exchanging the letter for the check in Poe's story disrupts its ideal itinerary, which would be expected in *The Gift's* tale. Though excluded from affective relations altogether, the returned letter could have still been a token of Dupin's partisanship and loyalty, his admiration or respect. Dupin, indeed, does become a sender of the letter, entrusting the Prefect to deliver it to the Queen. Yet he prefers simply to be paid for his service, choosing to remain anonymous.

Poe was certainly well aware of the entirely commercial nature of *The Gift* and similar annuals. The Carey and Hart project was the opposite of Poe's own project of *The Stylus*, an ideal

²⁹ Mabbott compares different editions of the tale in his textual notes to "The Purloined Letter" (see *Collected Works*, III, 972-74).

magazine aiming to improve the general taste and quality of American periodicals. Poe planned to sell *The Stylus* for the price of a gift book (three dollars per volume), and yet at the same time he insisted on the subsidiary function of the ornaments, for example: “Engravings, when used, will be in the highest style of Art, but are promised only in obvious illustration of the text, and in strict keeping with the Magazine character.”³⁰ “The Prospectus of *The Stylus*,” written the same year as “The Purloined Letter,” juxtaposes the “TRUTH” of its editor’s “*iron pen*” and the general dishonesty of contemporary periodicals. Poe’s reluctance to disguise the true, commercial nature of exchange relations could therefore be viewed as a tongue-in-cheek attempt to smuggle the “TRUTH” in the conventional format of a sellable story. The fifty thousand francs that Dupin earns is a considerable sum of money, but it is still part of “a *very* liberal reward” that the Prefect is going to get for the letter. Although Poe believed that the tale’s effect could “be estimated better by the circulation of the Magazine,”³¹ the overall profit from the circulation was often beyond estimation and always beyond the reach of the individual contributor. The author, as the detective, has only a share in the reward.

And yet thinking more broadly of Poe’s “economic imagination,”³² a more likely suggestion is that the idea of gift giving was incompatible for Poe with the idea of intellectual property. A good example is his gift-book-mediated correspondence with Washington Irving related to Poe’s tale “William Wilson” (1839). In the essay “The Unwritten Drama of Lord Byron” published in *The Gift* for 1836 (published in 1835), Irving generously offered an allegedly Byronic plot “to a poet or a dramatist of the Byron school.”³³ Poe took the challenge and realized the idea in “William Wilson,” issued in *The Gift* four

³⁰ See Edgar Allan Poe, “Prospectus of *The Stylus*” (1845), in his *Essays and Reviews*, ed. G. R. Thompson (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1984), p. 1,033.

³¹ See Edgar Allan Poe, letter to Thomas W. White, 30 April 1835, in *The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. John Ward Ostrom, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1948), I, 58.

³² See Terence Whalen, *Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses: The Political Economy of Literature in Antebellum America* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1999), p. 52.

³³ Washington Irving, “An Unwritten Drama of Lord Byron,” in *The Gift* (1836 [1835]), p. 171.

years later.³⁴ No matter how tempting it could be to think of Irving-Poe relations in the terms of a gift-exchange, Poe himself considered Irving a shareholder rather than a donor. Sending a copy of his tale to Irving, Poe wrote: "I have hoped that, having thus a right of ownership in my 'William Wilson', you will be induced to read it—and I also hope that, reading it, you will find in it something to approve [approve]."³⁵ A request of a public letter in favor of "William Wilson" was an attempt to charge Irving with responsibility for the plot he had given away. Unlike a gift-giver, a shareholder should take interest in investment, even if the expected profit from the share is symbolic. Equally, the letter's itinerary in "The Purloined Letter" lies entirely within the sphere of economic relations between the agents, excluded from any sort of affectionate gift-giving (the presumed love-correspondence between the Queen and S—— is pushed to the narrative's margin).

A different type of relation manifests itself near the tale's closure when Dupin leaves the facsimile of the purloined letter to D—— and signs it, breaking his anonymity. His signature is itself a cipher, a quotation, but Dupin has no doubts that D——, well acquainted with his signature, will recognize it. The facsimile is thus not a facsimile in the strict sense: when signed and readdressed, it becomes an independent message. This is emphasized in the tale's narrative structure: the story of Dupin's and D——'s past relations has, indeed, nothing to do with the purloined-letter plot. Dupin says at the end: "To be sure, D——, at Vienna once, did me an evil turn, which I told him, quite good-humouredly, that I should remember. So, as I knew he would feel some curiosity in regard to the identity of the person who had outwitted him, I thought it a pity not to give him a clue" ("The Purloined Letter," p. 61). The replaced letter becomes a token of hatred, an instrument of revenge; further, the allusion to the myth about Atreus and Thyestes in the quotation left by Dupin ("Un dessein si funeste, / S'il n'est digne d'Atrée, est digne de Thyeste" [p. 61]) suggests the motif of blood feud

³⁴ See Edgar A. Poe, "William Wilson: A Tale," in *The Gift: A Christmas and New Year's Present for 1840*, ed. [Eliza] Leslie (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1839), pp. 229–53.

³⁵ Edgar Allan Poe, letter to Washington Irving, 12 October 1839; quoted in John Ostrom, "Supplement to *The Letters of Poe*," *American Literature*, 24 (1952), 360.

between him and D——, his antipode and double.³⁶ The homological structure of gift exchange and blood feud is a commonplace in social anthropology, potlatch being one of its best illustrations. Dupin, like his creator, the “literary Mohawk” Edgar Allan Poe, mediating revenge with a letter, replaces a violent gesture by a literary quotation.³⁷ The gift motif thus reappears at the very end of “The Purloined Letter,” but, indeed, “turned . . . inside out” (“The Purloined Letter,” p. 59).³⁸

There has been a long tradition of reading “The Purloined Letter” as an autobiographical tale, and of reading this particular final scene as an allusion to Poe’s own literary battles. The rivalries, thefts, invasions of privacy, and personal assaults that Poe witnessed during his magazinist career, are, indeed, looming behind the plot.³⁹ In January 1845 he notoriously attacked *The Waif*,

³⁶ Derrida writes about the “rivalrous and duplicitous identification of the two brothers,” Dupin and D—— (see “Purveyor of Truth,” p. 203). For discussions of the Doppelgänger motif in the tale, see Patrick F. Quinn, *The French Face of Edgar Poe* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1957), pp. 223–56; Joseph J. Moldenhauer, “Murder as a Fine Art: Basic Connections between Poe’s Aesthetics, Psychology, and Moral Vision,” *PMLA*, 83 (1968), 284–97; and Liahna Klenman Babener, “The Shadow’s Shadow: The Motif of the Double in Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Purloined Letter,’” in *The Purloined Poe*, pp. 323–34 (originally published 1972).

³⁷ Poe was called “Our Literary Mohawk” in A.J.H. Duganne’s poem “A Mirror for Authors,” published in *Holden’s Dollar Magazine*, 3 (1849), together with a caricature by F.O.C. Darley representing Poe as a ferocious Indian with a tomahawk in his hand. In fact, Poe’s image as an Indian, “scalping, brow-beating and otherwise using-up” a “herd of poor-devil authors,” “assumed almost the status of a critical cliché” in the 1840s (see Leon Jackson, “Behold Our Literary Mohawk, Poe’: Literary Nationalism and the ‘Indianation’ of Antebellum American Culture,” *ESQ*, 48 [2002], 97. Jackson quotes from Poe’s “The Literary Life of Thingum Bob, Esq.” [1844]).

³⁸ Quite a different example is the publication of “The Gold-Bug” in the *Dollar Newspaper* in 1843, which Louis A. Renza describes in terms of “doubling” (rather than “inversion”): “doubled by the ‘dollar’ newspaper in which he published ‘The Gold-Bug,’ there exists the synonymy between treasure and the likely commodity-value Poe places on his tale within his literary-journalistic marketplace. For that matter, its serial mode of publication arguably redoubles the tale’s narrative suspense, thereby overtly soliciting public interest to increase its market value” (Renza, *Edgar Allan Poe, Wallace Stevens, and the Poetics of American Privacy* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 2002], p. 34).

³⁹ See, for example, Arthur Quinn’s statement in his canonical critical biography: “Both of them [Dupin and D——] have characteristics of Poe, the power of analysis and the imagination that transcends analysis. Like Dupin, Poe could long remember an injury; like D—— he could neglect to remember that he had injured a possible enemy” (Arthur Hobson Quinn, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography* [New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1941], pp. 421–22).

a gift book compiled by Longfellow. Like Dupin, who identifies an apparently worthless piece of paper (a real waif, indeed!) as a purloined letter, Poe found a purloined poem in the book: “Having fairly transcribed the two poems (about the respective dates of which we knew nothing) we have only to remark, as quietly as we can, that *somebody is a thief*.”⁴⁰ Accusing Longfellow himself of imitating American poems deliberately omitted from the selection, Poe initiated a famous debate with “Outis,” presumably his self-created fictional opponent. The literary theft “in the open day” was one of the points at issue in their polemics.

But placing “The Purloined Letter” in the gift book framework, we can see that Poe does not simply register literary practices of the time. He rather mediates the conventional gift book narrative of a heterosexual intrigue by a homosocial one, and thus engages the typical gender economy of the annual. The letter exchange takes place not between a lady and her admirer (a reader and her loving friend and/or a caring publisher) but “between men,” as it were. The reader’s attention is violently redirected from the itinerary of a love message to the dynamics of power; a female’s personal secret is but a “use-value” object in the men’s struggle. The “asymmetrical conditions of gift-book circulation” are replaced by the striking symmetry of the tale’s “round robin” plot.

Paradoxically, Poe understands the male world of power as a grotesque inversion of the female literary world, the one of gift books, lady’s books, and literary annuals. In Letter 6 (18 June 1844) of his “Doings of Gotham” series Poe speaks of the “masculine energy and ability” of the editor of the gift book *Opal*, Sarah Hale.⁴¹ But his “androgynous” Dupin⁴² is, indeed, Achilles, who “hid himself among women,” as the famous motto to “The

⁴⁰ See Edgar Allan Poe, “Longfellow’s *Waif*, with an Exchange” (1845), in *Essays and Reviews*, p. 702. The poem discussed by Poe is Thomas Hood’s “The Death-Bed” (1831). Poe gives the example of the “parallel poem” by James Aldrich from Rufus W. Griswold’s *Poets and Poetry of America* (1842).

⁴¹ Hale was a famous editor of *Godey’s Lady’s Book*. See Edgar Allan Poe, “Doings of Gotham, Letter VI,” *Columbia Spy*, 18 June 1844, p. 3; rpt. in Poe, *Doings of Gotham*, ed. Jacob E. Spannuth and Thomas Olive Mabbott (Pottsville, Penn.: Jacob E. Spannuth, 1929), p. 68.

⁴² See Cynthia S. Jordan, “Poe’s Re-Vision: The Recovery of the Second Story,” *American Literature*, 59 (1987), 12.

Murders in the Rue Morgue” from Thomas Browne might well suggest (“What song the Syrens sang, or what name Achilles assumed when he hid himself among women, although puzzling questions, are not beyond *all* conjecture”).⁴³ “The Purloined Letter,” framed by female or female-addressed writing, seems to combine analytic powers of detection, commonly attributed to men, with feminine attenuated apprehension of material data. And still Dupin not so much recovers “the second story—‘the woman’s story’—which has previously gone untold,” as Cynthia Jordan contends (“Poe’s Re-Vision,” p. 5), but purloins it instead. The homosocial erotics of “The Purloined Letter” strikingly reveals itself when put against the background of the gift book tradition more or less openly commodifying heterosexual conventions.

Jacques Lacan’s insightful reading was needed in order to discover the “feminine nature” of Dupin’s hostility to D——.⁴⁴ The gift book framework seems to support Lacan’s idea about the materiality of the signifier as well as his observation concerning “the oddest *odor di femina*” passing from one purloiner to the other (“Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” p. 48). His famous statement that “a letter always arrives at its destination” (p. 58) works beautifully if we read Poe’s tale together with “The Schoolmaster’s Progress,” “The Old Valentine,” “The Unpresuming Mr. Hudson,” or even “The Power of an ‘Injured Look.’” But at the same time, in the “high theory” self-reflexive interpretations of “The Purloined Letter,” Poe’s own tale begins to play the same function as the letter does in the story: it becomes an object of hatred and revenge, an instrument of insult.

As is well known, Jacques Derrida in “The Purveyor of Truth,” attempting to undermine Lacan’s authoritative position, stressed Lacan’s “disdainful nervousness” (“The Purveyor of Truth,” p. 189) toward Marie Bonaparte, the author of a psychobiographical study on Poe and a loyal disciple of Sigmund Freud (Lacan called her a “cook” in a footnote referring to the

⁴³ See Edgar Allan Poe, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841), in his *Poetry and Tales*, ed. Patrick F. Quinn (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1984), p. 397. Jordan comments: “The epigraph to the first tale, ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue,’ introduces the idea of crossing gender boundaries to recover the now ‘dimembered story’ of female experience” (“Poe’s Re-Vision,” p. 13).

⁴⁴ See Lacan, “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” p. 51.

“grilling” nature of her analysis).⁴⁵ Barbara Johnson further demonstrated Derrida’s involvement in the “feud” with Lacan as she step-by-step deconstructed Derrida’s deconstruction of “The Seminar” and brought in the issue of the personal offense.⁴⁶ Johnson’s own relation to the story of rivalry was neutralized by the chosen “undecidability” of her position, as John Irwin pointed out.⁴⁷ But more recently, Kay Stockholder has accused Johnson of *insulting* Derrida “by saying that he accuses Lacan of what he himself is guilty.”⁴⁸

The odd turn of Poe’s plot becomes reenacted in its critical readings and gets similar implications. The “contagious” logic of the purloined letter, to borrow Johnson’s term (“Frame of Reference,” p. 214), maps out relations between the agents of a new literary milieu according to the same fictional pattern. Further, new details being added flesh out the story of rivalry between Lacan and Bonaparte, Lacan and Derrida. The word “cook” in Lacan’s footnote, one critic suggests, is a hint at Bonaparte’s “unsuccessful surgical interventions and cauterizing (grilling) of her clitoris in a vain attempt to regain her sexual sensitivity”; she was (as we learn) “obsessed by the belief that frigidity was due to a malfunction or a misplacement of the clitoris, to which she compared the little brass knob in her comment on Poe’s tale.”⁴⁹ The violent attack on Bonaparte attributed to Lacan initiates wordplay around her name. Another critic speaks of Lacan’s insult as of “the murder

⁴⁵ See Lacan, “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” pp. 48, 54 n. 14. Lacan refers here to Charles Baudelaire’s mistranslation of the passage regarding the exact location of the letter mentioned by Bonaparte. The location—beneath the mantel piece as in Poe’s tale, not above it as in the mistranslation—was crucial for Bonaparte, who interpreted the letter as a penis hanging from a little brass knob of the mother’s body. See Marie Bonaparte, *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Psycho-Analytic Interpretation*, trans. John Rodker (New York: Humanities Press, 1971), pp. 483–84 (originally published 1958).

⁴⁶ See Johnson, “Frame of Reference,” p. 219. Following Derrida, Johnson carefully examines the footnotes—now to Derrida’s book *Positions* (1972). There she finds Derrida mentioning Lacan’s “acts of aggression” in his address.

⁴⁷ See Irwin, “Mysteries We Reread,” p. 1, 177.

⁴⁸ See Stockholder, “Is Anybody at Home in the Text? Psychoanalysis and the Question of Poe,” *American Imago*, 57 (2000), 312.

⁴⁹ See François Peraldi, “A Note on Time in ‘The Purloined Letter,’” in *The Purloined Poe*, p. 337.

of Marie," bringing together "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" (the middle story in Poe's trilogy) and "maternal Marie," Lacan's own middle name.⁵⁰ The royal name of Mme Bonaparte eventually turns her into a "psychoanalytic Marie Antoinette" (Bretzius, "The Figure-Power Dialectic," p. 683), the "murder" therefore becomes symbolic regicide. The violated body of a woman, present in Poe's first two detective tales and missing in "The Purloined Letter," returns to the thus expanded plot in the course of its reenactment and (re)narration. The body of Marie, she of the cauterized clitoris or she of the decapitated head, reinforces the homosocial nature of the tale's intrigue as it gets a new turn in its critical interpretations.

Dynamics of writing, reading, and power in and around "The Purloined Letter" had therefore a direct impact on the famous debate, revealing the hidden potential of the plot. The endurance of Poe's storyline and its forceful erotic implications reinforce the fact that his tale (to use the terms of Pierre Bourdieu) rather than being a "pure product of a milieu," contributed to "transforming" the milieu, "which is accomplished, in part, through the objectification of that milieu."⁵¹ This objectification can best be explained as a purloining and inverting of what represented, more or less overtly, the existing ideology of emerging literary culture. The affinities between *The Gift* and "The Purloined Letter" as well as their discrepancies are spontaneous and accidental. But the fact that Poe's tale fits in the ideological framework of the nineteenth-century periodical and resists it at the same time, both matching and disrupting its reader's expectations, is symptomatic.⁵²

⁵⁰ See Stephen Bretzius, "The Figure-Power Dialectic: Poe's 'Purloined Letter,'" *MLN*, 110 (1995), 682–83.

⁵¹ Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Oxford: Polity Press, 1992), p. 104.

⁵² During the discussion that followed my lecture at the University of Virginia, Stephen Railton pointed out another possible twist. Returning the letter to the Queen, Dupin sustains (presumably) adulterous relations, very much at odds with the didactical character of the annual. Indeed, Dupin is at the same time the partisan of the lady—not the least because he respects her privacy (on this topic, see Richard Hull, "The Purloined Letter': Poe's Detective Story vs. Panoptic Foucauldian Theory," *Style*, 24 [1990], 201–14)—and an accomplice in the "crime" against the royalty and, as one might suspect, against the moral.

In Sedgwick's story the album, a gift book substitute, is neatly enveloped in white paper bound with a blue ribbon. The card-rack of pasteboard where Dupin discovers the purloined letter hangs under the mantelpiece, "dangling by a dirty blue riband" ("The Purloined Letter," p. 58; "ribbon" in the revision of 1845), its paper being soiled and torn. The only line written on the envelope beneath the initials is a "quotation from the text-books of lovers." Dupin copies "into the middle of the blank sheet" (p. 61) of his letter a quotation from Crebillon's revenge play, and leaves it inside. While Poe's tale inverts the exemplary plot-model of *The Gift*, the purloined letter in the story strikingly resembles a gift book turned inside out.

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ABSTRACT

Alexandra Urakova, "'The Purloined Letter' in the Gift Book: Reading Poe in a Contemporary Context" (pp. 323–346)

The essay returns Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter" to *The Gift: A Christmas, New Year, and Birthday Present, 1845*, the gift book in which it was originally published, in order to explore its relationship to its apparently arbitrary frame. Correspondences among Poe's tale and the ones that surround it in *The Gift* invite us to read "The Purloined Letter" in relation to the social economy of the gift book and against the background of what could be called its generic plot. While the mainstream stories reemphasize commercial strategy based on commodified seduction, I contend that "The Purloined Letter" provides us with a more complex model that both fulfills the reader's expectations and critiques the underlying ideology of "The Gift." I therefore show how Poe "purloins" the gift book's typical gender economy and how the homosocial eroticism of his tale bears on its famous twentieth-century readings.

Keywords: Edgar Allan Poe; "The Purloined Letter"; gift books; gift economy; nineteenth-century periodical culture