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CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture
ISSN 1481-4374
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Volume 10 (2008) Issue 4 Article 4

Death and Love in Poe's and Schwob's Readings of the Classics

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Recommended Citation

González-Rivas Fernández, Ana; and Jurado, Francisco García. "Death and Love in Poe's and Schwob's Readings of the Classics." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 10.4 (2008): <http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1393>

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CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture

ISSN 1481-4374 <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>
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Volume 10 Issue 4 (December 2008) Article 4
Ana González-Rivas Fernández and Francisco García Jurado,
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<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss4/4>

Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 10.4 (2008)
Thematic issue *New Studies on the Fantastic in Literature*
Edited by Asunción López-Varela
<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol10/iss4/>

Abstract: In their article "Death and Love in Poe's and Schwob's Readings of the Classics," Ana González-Rivas Fernández and Francisco García Jurado propose that although Gothic literature usually relegates the theme of love to the background, devoting most of its attention to the supernatural and to darkness, there are also literary texts in which love is mixed with life beyond the grave. This is the case, for example, of Théophile Gautier's *La Morte amoureuse* (1836), the story of a vampire who comes back to life in her "undead" condition in order to seduce a priest. The theme of love and death awakened great interest among the Romantics, but this is not unique to modern literature: Greco-Roman writers had already dealt successfully with this topic and modern authors used this to create their own fictions. González-Rivas Fernández and García Jurado analyze how modern authors of Gothic narratives read certain ancient texts regarding love and death and how they use them in their own narratives: they establish a complex relationship between ancient and modern texts that transcends mere imitation or inspiration. González-Rivas Fernández and García Jurado discuss the case of Poe, whose texts "Berenice" and "Ligeia" are based on particular readings of previous narratives of ancient as well as mysterious origin and they analyze the re-reading of Poe by Marcel Schwob.

Ana GONZÁLEZ-RIVAS FERNÁNDEZ and Francisco GARCÍA JURADO

Death and Love in Poe's and Schwob's Readings of the Classics

Edgar Allan Poe's work represents a turning point in the evolution of Gothic literature: the passage from the object to the subject, from fear caused by the outside world to the terror that emerges within oneself, from the depths of the psyche. This shift in focus was to be taken up by authors such as Oscar Wilde and Henry James. In "Berenice" (1835) and "Ligeia" (1838), Poe develops a literary topos common in his narratives, that of the dead beloved who rises from her grave and comes back to life. These two stories are connected with his other literary works such as "Morella" (1835), "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), or poems such as "The Sleeper" (1831, 1836, 1845), which share the same range of themes. On the other hand, in order to understand Poe's obsession with this motif, we must go back to his biography and to the deaths of his wife and cousin Virginia, his mother, a friend's mother, and his stepmother, all dear to Poe.

In the first part of this article, we analyze the general characteristics of "Berenice" and "Ligeia," as well as the dialogue that they maintain with classical literature. This theme has, in part, already been examined by other scholars who have analysed Poe's interest in Greco-Roman literature. But none of these previous studies have considered the classical as part of Poe's Gothic facet and so none of them has defined the system of intertextuality between the two elements which transcend the particularity of Poe's case. Darlene Harbour Unrue made a step in this direction when she stated that "Edgar Allan Poe's affinity with classical values has not been properly noted by critics and other readers who have interpreted the romantic and Gothic elements in his fiction and poetry as proof of Poe's predilection for the subjective, macabre, and fantastic, as well as transcendental" (112). However, Unrue analyzes the presence of the classical in Poe's work by separating him from the romantic tradition, which again implies *a priori* an approach that maintains the apparently irreconcilable opposition between classical literature and the Gothic.

The tale of "Berenice" is one of the most horrific stories Poe ever wrote, a fact that many scholars have noticed and that Poe himself recognized. It tells the story of two cousins, Egaeus and Berenice, who, after spending their childhood together, fall in love and decide to get married. At this time, each of them begins to change: Berenice fells ill and slips little by little towards death. Egaeus, on the other hand, becomes more and more affected by a mental illness diagnosed as "monomania," obsessions with certain details which lead to his absorption in reverie. One day, he becomes fixated on Berenice's teeth, and after she dies, he begins to think about them obsessively. Suddenly, one of the servants bursts into the library and tells Egaeus that Berenice's grave has been profaned and that the girl has been found bleeding and still alive. Egaeus realizes then that he is covered in mud and blood and he fixes his gaze on a small box with a strange Latin inscription on it. He opens it and sees Berenice's teeth, which, in his delirium, he had himself extracted from the young woman while she was still breathing. Further, in the story of "Berenice" there are two aspects related to the classical world that play an important role in the axis of the narrative: the name of the characters and the Latin quotation attributed to a medieval Arab writer, Ebn Zaiat. Firstly, the names of Egaeus and Berenice have clear classical evocations. Egaeus was the king of Athens who threw himself into the sea when he believed that his son Theseus had been killed by the Minotaur. Berenice was the wife of Ptolomeus the Third. Worried about her husband's leaving for war in Syria, she promised her hair to Aphrodite if he came back alive and safe. On her husband's return, Berenice gave her hair to the goddess, who transformed it into a constellation. In the first case, the resemblance between Poe's Egaeus and the king of Athens probably lies in the rashness that leads both men to the misinterpretation of the deaths of Theseus and Berenice and, therefore to the final tragedy. As far as Poe's Berenice is concerned, she has in common with the queen of Egypt the sacrifice which they both make for the beloved man; a sacrifice the price of which is a part of themselves (the hair and the teeth). With the choice of the names of

Egaeus and Berenice, Poe manages to raise his characters to the category of ancient royalty, transposing a family matter onto an epic level.

The other motif that brings the classical literature and themes into Poe's work is the Latin quotation that heads the tale, and which is attributed to the Arab poet Ebn Zaiat: "My mates used to tell me that if I visited my loved's sepulchrum, / my sorrow will relieved a bit" ("Dicebant mihi sodales, si sepulchrum amicae visitarem, / Curas meas aliquantulum fore levantas") (for the attribution of this quotation, see Beard). The quotation is repeated within the narrative itself, but this time as part of the tale itself: it is the inscription on the box in which Egaeus unconsciously hides Berenice's teeth. The repetition of the initial quotation in the body of the narrative is a phenomenon that García Jurado has called "double quotation" and this plays an important role in the intertextual relationships (see "Las citas grecolatinas"). It should be highlighted that in this case the relationships between the Classics and the Gothic are established through a translation into Latin, probably written by Poe himself. This use of a classical language in modern literature shows the importance of antiquity. The two mechanisms that are activated through Zaiat's quotation (the "double quotation" and the use of Latin) reveal Poe's position as a reader of Gothic literature, where both strategies had already been used to establish intertextuality with Greco-Roman literature. It can be argued that the phenomenon of the "double quotation" in the literature of terror began intuitively in works such as *Melmoth, the Wanderer* (1820), by Charles Maturin, where this device reveals the specific transcendence of certain ancient texts in modern ones. As García Jurado points out, Poe was not slow to notice the great possibilities of this mechanism and he uses them in "Berenice," where the quotation takes on its full sense only when it appears written on the box in the library (see "Las citas grecolatinas"). Poe had already experimented with the Latin quotation in other accounts such as in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" or "The Purloined Letter" but, as regards the "double quotation," Poe forms the link between Maturin and modern authors such as Schwob, who also uses this device in the tale called "Béatrice" (see García Jurado, "Las citas grecolatinas"). In this way, Poe and Schwob manage to conceptualize a technique that in our times is still an important influence for authors such as Stephen King.

The use of Latin in Gothic literature, however, was a common strategy in the very first novels, such as *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) by Horace Walpole or *The Monk* (1796) by Matthew Gregory Lewis. Latin evokes the Roman Empire, but also the Catholic Church, and Latin, therefore, is the common denominator in the fight between paganism and christianity, a theme that often underlies Gothic literature, at least in its early stages. As a religious language, Latin is also a way to enter into contact with the great beyond, which, in the Manichean terms of the Gothic means heaven as well as hell. On the other hand, Latin is the language of terror, of the Inquisition, of Maria Tudor, and of so many other people and institutions with horrific connotations in the collective mind of the English people. In short, Latin is the language of horror and this explains its use in the Gothic novel. Poe knew all these connotations and took advantage of them, and years later, Schwob too did not scorn this technique and he too used Latin to his advantage.

Ligeia was a beautiful young woman whom the narrator fell in love with, a girl with dark eyes and a broad education. In her lover's eyes, Ligeia was an ethereal and almost intangible woman. After their marriage, Ligeia falls ill and dies and the narrator marries another woman, Lady Rowena. However, the pull of Ligeia is too strong for the narrator and the mere recollection of her makes him hate his new wife. Lady Rowena falls ill too, and also dies, probably because of three or four drops that fall "mysteriously" into her drink. On the night of her death, and while the corpse is still in the conjugal chamber, the narrator watches how the corpse seems to come to life several times and then falls again in a faint. Finally, the beloved woman wakes up, and she is no longer Lady Rowena, but Ligeia. In "Ligeia" several references to the classical world can be found (see Rea). The main character's name is a good example, and Bettina L. Knapp reads it as an echo of Ligea (*sic*), one of the nymphs of Virgil's *Georgics*. The comparison with a nymph, a spirit of the woods and the waters, is appropriate to

define Ligeia, an ethereal woman whom the narrator met far away in the past in an idyllic landscape, "in some large, old, decaying city near the Rhine" (Poe 654). Likewise, the name of Ligeia seems to be connected with Ligia (see Grimal), one of the sirens of classical antiquity, an interpretation based on certain details of the description and the widespread knowledge of the character (see Rea). Finally, as regards the concept of the siren, some scholars (e.g., Misrahi 181) have found another literary precedent in Ligea, a siren representing the harmony of nature in the poem *Comus* by John Milton.

Throughout the tale, there are other references that shape the character of Ligeia as a mythological being of ancient Greece. This can be seen in the description of her by the narrator, a description where all references to Ligeia's body finish with a nod to classical fantasy. Referring to her hair, the narrator uses the Homeric adjective "hyacinthine": "the raven-black, the glossy, the luxuriant and the naturally-curling tresses, setting forth the full force of the Homeric epithet, 'hyacinthine!'" (Poe 655). Somewhat later, the narrator also finds a Hellenic look in Ligeia's chin: "I scrutinized the formation of the chin -- and there, too, I found the gentleness of breadth, the softness and the majesty, the fullness and the spirituality, of the Greek -- the contour which the god Apollo revealed but in a dream, to Cleomenes, the son of the Athenian" (Poe 655). Finally, the narrator pauses before Ligeia's eyes, a mirror of her soul and the source of his enchantment, and again he relies on mythology to express her beauty: "Those eyes! Those large, those shining, those divine orbs! They became to me twin stars of Leda, and I to them devoutest of astrologers" (Poe 656). In conclusion, Ligeia was at the same time nymph, goddess, and siren, a mythological being that had captivated the imagination of Poe and his narrator.

"Berenice" and "Ligeia" are two accounts of love and death; or, to be more precise, two accounts of a powerful love that surpasses the boundaries of death. There are many areas in common between the two tales; and in fact, from a narratological point of view, we can view them as the same text. Both in "Berenice" and in "Ligeia" the beloved woman becomes the obsession of the main character, an obsession that reappears after the women's death. The return of the beloved woman from the grave symbolizes the return of the repressed with sexual implications from a Freudian point of view as Christopher Rollason explains. In both tales, moreover, there is an element which constitutes the turning point in the narrative and the hinge upon which the states of love and death rotate at the same time: marriage. When the marriage is agreed to, the illnesses of Berenice and Egaeus become more acute. Marriage is also the prelude of Ligeia's death and a new marriage (and a new death) is what brings her back to life. These connections between marriage and death are not new in literature: already in classical mythology there are stories where both elements are linked (Danaides, Persephone) and there are also several examples in Gothic literature old and new: for example, one scene in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, "The Spectre Bride," attributed to William Harrison Ainsworth or see Tim Burton's recent film *The Corpse Bride*. Another of the points that link the tales of "Berenice" and "Ligeia" is that in neither of them is the supernatural element confirmed since both narrators are untrustworthy: the first, due to a psychological disorder and the consumption of opium, and the second, to the effects of opium alone. With this strategy, Poe places his narration in an ambiguous space, between fantasy and reality, near to the rationalist Gothic of Ann Radcliffe.

Poe's tales also revive a classical text about death and love: the story of Philinnion, told by Flegon of Tralles and summed up by Proclus. Philinnion, daughter of Demostratos and Charito, married Craterus, although she was actually in love with Machates. A few months after their wedding, Philinnion died, but came back to life and visited Machates every night. By this time, Machates was a host at Demostratos and Charitos's house. One night, one of the maids discovered the two lovers and ran to tell the secret to Philinnion's parents. Charito recognized Philinnion, but she decided to wait until the morning to ask for an explanation. However, as soon as dawn broke, the girl disappeared, and Machates was only able to describe a few details about her. All of them waited then until the night, and when Philinnion appeared, Machates called her parents. When she saw them, Philinnion explained

that she had returned by divine will, and as soon as she finished talking, she fell again into a faint. The next day, Philinnion's parents went to their daughter's grave, but could only find a ring and a glass, two presents from Machates. Philinnion's corpse, however, was still at Demostratos's home. After consulting a seer, the girl was buried again on the outskirts of the city and a number of sacrifices were carried out in honour of divinities. Machates, on the other hand, committed suicide in desperation (for more on this story, see, e.g., Hansen 71-77).

As with Philinnion, love is the emotion that draws Berenice and Ligeia out of their graves, although in different ways: whereas Philinnion comes out of her own free will and with the permission of the divinities of Hell, Berenice and Ligeia are called by their lovers, either through the violence of a tooth extraction (in the case of Berenice) or through another death and an imaginary resurrection (in the case of Ligeia). In the three stories love seems to transcend the physical frontiers of death, which are insurmountable in the absence of this feeling of devotion. Beyond Poe, the story of Philinnion had important echoes in Gothic literature and was used by authors such as Goethe (*Die Braut von Korinth*, 1797), Washington Irving ("Adventure of a German Student" in *Tales of a Traveller*, 1824) and Théophile Gautier (*La Morte amoureuse*, 1836). Therefore, in his choice of a theme like the return of the dead beloved, Poe reveals himself to be a reader of Gothic and classical literature, which both show the same anxieties.

Despite his short life, Marcel Schwob (1867-1905) achieved a prominent place among the greatest authors of French literature. Just as Poe was deeply affected by his love life and by his readings, Schwob's works show events from his life such as the death of his lover Louise, to whom he dedicated *Le Livre de Monelle*, as well as his philological and literary education. As a keen reader of Poe, to whom he refers on several occasions, Schwob recreates many of his aesthetic themes, which he considered from a new perspective closer to the aesthetics of symbolism and *fin-de-siècle* French literature. In his imaginary life, entitled "Septima, incantatrice," the Latin text which Schwob is inspired by is an epigraphic document (on this, see, e.g., García Jurado, *Marcel Schwob*). This is what is called in Latin a *tabella defixionis* (*tabella*, number 270 in Audollent's edition), found in 1889 in the African city of Hadrumento, and edited for the first time in 1890, very soon before the writing of Schwob's *Vies*. It is a magic document, written to procure the love of a man. The *tabella*, whose materiality appears at the end of the tale, is written in Latin, although with Greek characters, and it begins with an invocation of hell:

> I ask ... by the great god and the Anteros and by the one who has a falcon on his head and by the seven stars, that at the moment when I have composed this, Sextilius, son of Dionysia, will sleep no more, that he burn up and be made mad, and that he neither sleep nor be able to sit nor speak, but that he has me in his mind, Septima, daughter of Amoena, that he is consumed, mad with love and desire for me, that the soul and heart of Sextilius, son of Dionysia, be consumed with love and desire for me, Septima, daughter of Amoena. And you, Abar, Barbarie, Eloe, Pachnouphy, Puthiemi, grant that Sextilius, son of Dionysia, never find any sleep but be consumed with love and desire for me, that his spirit and body be burned up and every part of the entire body of Sextilius, son of Dionysia. And if not I shall descend into the cave of Osiris and I will destroy the mummy and send it into the river which carries it, for I am the great Decan of the great god Achrammachalala. (Soren 245)

The content of the *tabella* is a spell where a young girl, Septima, asks for the man she is in love with, Sextilius, to be consumed with love for her. Schwob's account is faithful to this plot, although, in order to develop a new story, he introduces innovations such as the description of an African landscape or the addition of a new character, Septima's dead sister. Even with this loyalty to the original text -- this can be observed, for example, in the filiation formula of "Sextilius, son of Dionysia" -- it is remarkable how the spell of the *tabella* has been re-interpreted as an account of love and mystery. Displaying his broad knowledge of the ancient world, Schwob knows how to take advantage of the reference to the god Anteros in the text: "As swiftly as Eros aims the glances of eyes or whets the darts of his arrows, Anteros turns those glances aside and dulls the flying shafts. He is a kindly god, labouring among the dead, not cruel as the other is. Anteros possesses the nepenthe of forgetfulness. He

holds love to be the worst of human afflictions; he pursues love to cure love. Powerless, however, to enter a heart once caught by Eros, he seizes that heart's affinity. This is the method of the strife between Eros and Anteros, and the reason why Septima could not love Sextilius, for when Eros touched her with his flame, Anteros took the man she loved" (*Imaginary Lives* 58-59). Schwob moves between the personifications of Anteros of Cicero, Ovid, and the no less important viewpoint of Platonism as found in *Phaedrus*, where Plato talks about the image of "anti-love." The role of Anteros thus links with the literary thought of Schwob, a lover of oppositions. These oppositions -- that is, the Manichean opposition between good and evil or the search for the dark side of reality -- invite us to see a connection between Schwob's tale and Gothic aesthetics, of which Poe was also a part. Finally, it is important to note the innovations of Schwob in the text of the *tabella*, especially in the addition of Phoinissa, Septima's dead sister, to whom Septima entrusts the mission of inspiring love in Sextilius. Phoinissa is the adjective "Phoenicia," which in Latin literature is used to refer to the Carthaginian Dido, who, like Septima, was sick with love. There are also certain echoes of magic spells in learned Greco-Roman literature, such as Theocritus's idyll of "the sorceress," or the spell that Dido herself makes before Aeneas's departure. The spell, as pronounced by Septima, is a kind of synthesis of different texts, in particular of the *tabella*, that, in turn, underlies the whole narrative. In this way, the account seems to be a small dramatic dialogue inserted into the context of an imaginary life:

"Oh, my sister!," she began, "turn in your sleep and hear me! The little lamp of death's first hours is lighted. We gave you an ampula of colored glass, but you have let it slip through your fingers. Your necklace is broken and the golden beads are scattered around you. Nothing of ours is any longer yours, and he has now, the hawheaded one. O listen, my sister, you have power to carry my words. Fly to that heaven you know so well. Plead for me with Anteros. Implore the goddess Hathor. Beseech him, whose body once drifted safely on the seas to Babylon. Sister, pity a sorrow you never learned! By the seven stars of the magicians of Chaldea I entreat you. By those dark powers Carthage knows, by Iao, Abriao, Salbaal, and Bathbaal hear my invocation. Make him love me! Sextilius, son of Dyonisia, make him burn with love of me, Septima, daughter of our mother, Amoena … so that he shall burn in the night, so that she shall come to me by thy tomb, Phoinissa! Or if that cannot be, let us both be plunged into the shadows. Let Anteros chill the breath of us -- if he must quench this fire Eros has kindled! Perfumed death, drink the libation of my voice. *Achrammachalala*!" (60-61)

Phoinissa gives dramatic tension to the narrative, which finishes with a tragic ending similar to that of "Béatrice": "Phoinissa put her lips to the boy's mouth and the life went out of him like a bursted bubble. In her sister's cell she took Septima by the hand. And the kiss of Phoinissa and the claps of Phoinissa killed them both, Septima and Sextilius, in the same hour. Such was the dark issue of the struggle between Eros and Anteros, wherefrom the infernal powers received a slave and a freeman. (Schwob, "Imaginary Lives" 63). With regard to the characteristics of Schwob's imaginary life, "Septima" unites the quality of brevity with the profusion of visionary elements (such as corpses that come to life). As far as the use of Greco-Roman literature is concerned, it is remarkable that Schwob selected a rare text on the margins of Latin literature known to specialists only.

In comparison with Poe, there is the literary development of the theme of love and death based on the use of an ancient text, but other innovations also occur, such as the soul that flees from the mouth -- a theme which is treated in more detail in the tale of "Béatrice." If "Berenice" opens with an enigmatic quotation in Latin, "Béatrice" begins with a Greek quotation, a distic attributed to Plato: "My soul was on my lips as I was kissing Agathon. / Poor soul! She came hoping to cross over to him" (Schwob 104). This distic gives Schwob the opportunity to create a peculiar fantastic tale, where two lovers understand from the reading of Plato's verses that breath and soul are the same thing. In this way, when the beloved woman is about to die, the lover kisses her in order to catch inside himself the soul she is going to exhale. However, the result of this is in fact an unpleasant shock -- what actually comes to him is his beloved's voice. The traditional attribution of this poem to Plato is obviously based on the Socratic idea of the soul, although in this case it seems that the lack of confidence that Plato felt regarding poets was not taken into account. Nevertheless, Schwob's tale is about the reading of a

Platonic dialogue titled *Phaedon*, whose subtitle is "On the Immortality of the Soul." There is also an imaginary reading of some Greek authors, such as Xenophon and a very improbable Empedocles, who thus loses his status as an author of fragments. It should be also noted that the name chosen for the main female character, Béatrice, is possibly motivated by the name of Dante's beloved. As in Poe, nominalism plays an important role in the construction of a story. Finally, it is curious to observe how erudition and passion are mixed when the characters of the narrative find a distic attributed to Plato inside the pages of Aulus Gellius, to whom they refer with the ambiguous terms of "d'un grammairien de la decadence" (on this, see Garcia Jurado, *Marcel Schwob*).

Schwob's literary *oeuvre* contains two tales that turn on the theme of love and death, thus suggesting his interest in classical and nineteenth-century literature. However, Schwob shows a different perspective, above all in "Béatrice" where he develops this topic from the duality of body and soul; thus, instead of the loved woman's corpse what comes back to the lover is her spirit. Despite the differences, both accounts still represent the beloved woman who defies death for love, just as Philinnion did for Machates. Further, the first of Schwob's tales, "Septima," is ascribed to a modality described by Schwob as "imaginary lives," fictions in which he recreates made-up biographies. The tale of "Berenice," however, is more in the tradition of Poe, as can be observed in the linguistic games (nominalism) and in the use of the "double quotation," a resource which Schwob contextualized inside the Gothic genre. But, apart from the different methods of contextualization of the classical world, the high degree of erudition that Schwob shows in all these references, such as the use of the *tabella defixionis*, which reveals Schwob's philologist side, is remarkable.

In conclusion, our analysis of Poe's "Berenice" and "Ligeia" and Schwob's "Septima" and "Béatrice" suggests different possibilities of intertextuality between Greco-Roman and modern fantastic literature, specifically the Gothic. These influences and intertextualities have to do not only with a Romantic aesthetic, but also with the classical tradition itself, a motif that Schwob perpetuates within his Gothic story. The phonetic coincidence between the names of "Béatrice" and "Berenice," the use of the "double quotation" and of classical languages in general, and finally, the existence of certain ancient texts share the same theme in Poe's and Schwob's texts: that of a woman who, moved by love, comes out from her grave in search of her lover. Poe and Schwob make a modern reading of classical themes and adapt them to the new literary codes.

Note: Research for the above article was funded by the Ministry of Education and Science of Spain, Project MEC HUM2007-60326/FILO.

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