
The Motive for Murder in “The Cask of Amontillado” by Edgar Allan Poe

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Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado” (1846) has never failed to puzzle its readers. The story is a confession of a man who committed a horrible crime half a century ago. Montresor lures Fortunato into the family vaults under the pretext that he needs Fortunato’s opinion of the newly acquired Amontillado wine. In a remote niche of the crypt, Montresor fetters Fortunato to the wall and then bricks him in. The reader is perplexed by a seeming absence of the motive for this crime. Unable to find a logical explanation of Montresor’s hatred for Fortunato, most commentators conclude that Montresor is insane. Such interpretation, however, seems to make certain details in the elaborate structure of the story unnecessary and this, in turn, goes against Poe’s approach to composition.

In the essay “The Philosophy of Composition,” written in the same year as “The Cask of Amontillado,” Poe demonstrates that there are no details in his works that appear due to accident or intuition, and that his work proceeds “to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem” (166). While such an approach to creative writing has earned Poe an antipathetic reputation of the first “technocrat of art” from Theodore Adorno (193), it would find support with Russian Formalists. The Formalists’ view of the form “as the totality of the work’s various components” and their interest in analyzing the form by identifying the functions of the text’s various components (Todorov 10-11) match Poe’s ideas about writing. Indeed, “The Cask of Amontillado” could be among the Formalists’ favorite texts, for the details in this story are like pieces of a mosaic, each of which serves the purpose of completing the whole. My hypothesis is that the story contains all the information necessary for finding an explanation for Montresor’s heinous deed.

Although the subject matter of Poe’s story is a murder, “The Cask of Amontillado” is not a tale of detection, for there is no investigation of Montresor’s crime.¹ The criminal himself explains how he committed the murder. Despite this explanation, “The Cask of Amontillado” is a mystery, for at its heart lies an intriguing question: “Why did he do it?” This question is different from the “Who’s done

it?” of a classical mystery, as the latter presents crime as a logical puzzle solved by a detective thanks to his intellect (Rahn 49-50). Nonetheless, in the absence of the figure of a detective, the central question of Poe’s story compels the reader to perform an intellectual act of detection himself. Moreover, this question requires that the reader reverse the process of solving the mystery. Whereas a detective begins his investigation with defining motives for the crime, the reader of “The Cask of Amontillado” should decipher the circumstances described by Montresor in order to determine the motive for his murder of Fortunato.

Far from being a mediocre murderer, Montresor elaborates a sophisticated philosophy of revenge: “I must not only punish, but punish with impunity. A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser. It is equally unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong” (848). A successful realization of this plan is questioned in criticism. G.R. Thompson, for example, argues that Montresor has failed to accomplish a perfect murder: “Montresor, rather than having successfully taken his revenge ‘with impunity’ . . . has instead suffered a fifty-years’ ravage of conscience” (13-14). David Halliburton also gives a didactic reading of the tale: “If the walls erected by Poe’s masons (‘The Black Cat,’ ‘The Cask of Amontillado’) are material, they are also existential: to take up mortar and trowel is to victimize the other, and through this process to bring about the victimization of oneself” (263).² According to Thompson, Montresor’s words in the opening of the story, “you, who so well know the nature of my soul” (848), are probably addressed to Montresor’s confessor, “for if Montresor has murdered Fortunato fifty years before,³ he must now be some seventy to eighty years of age” (13-14).⁴ Thompson uses the fact that Montresor’s narration is actually a confession made on his deathbed to support the argument about Montresor’s troubled conscience.

Without questioning the interpretation of Montresor’s narration as taking place at his deathbed, I would still ask if the fact of this belated confession gives us sufficient ground to assume that Montresor has suffered pangs of conscience for fifty years. Following J. Gerald Kennedy, Scott Peeples quotes Montresor in support of the argument about Montresor’s bad conscience: “Fifty years later, he still remembers his heart’s ‘growing sick—on account of the dampness of the catacombs,’ but his heartsickness likely arises from empathy with the man he is leaving to die amid that dampness” (150). The quoted phrase, however, can hardly be used as evidence of the character’s empathy towards his victim. In fact, it is one of the numerous instances of irony in Poe’s text. Charles May notes in this regard, “Even if our hypothesis that Montresor tells the story as a final confession . . . is correct, the tone or manner of his telling makes it clear that he has not atoned, for

he enjoys himself in the telling too much—as much, in fact, as he did when he committed the crime itself” (81). Indeed, the dash in the middle of the sentence—“My heart grew sick—on account of the dampness of the catacombs”—indicates a pause. When Montresor pronounces the first part of the phrase, the reader may believe that Montresor begins to feel sorry for the poor Fortunato. But when the narrator concludes that his heart is growing sick “on account of the dampness of the catacombs,” it becomes clear that Montresor feels satisfaction about his monstrous deed even after fifty years. The narrator is perfectly aware of the effect the second part of his sentence produces on his listener (even if the whole narration is Montresor’s last confession and his listener is a priest). It destroys any hope in Montresor’s humanity and highlights once again that Montresor feels no guilt regarding the murder. A bit earlier in the text, Montresor recollects how, after laying the fourth tier of the masonry, he stepped back to listen to “the furious vibrations of the chain” produced by his poor victim: “The noise lasted for several minutes, during which, that I might hearken to it with the more satisfaction, I ceased my labors and sat down upon the bones. When at last the clanking subsided, I resumed the trowel” (853). Poe’s character then is anything but Raskolnikov, the hero of Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, who confesses the murder he has committed because he is unable to overcome the excruciating feeling of guilt. Unlike Raskolnikov, Montresor is perfectly calm and rational in his account. He never expresses pity for his enemy or feels remorse for what he did. In the essay “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel,” Mikhail Bakhtin describes Montresor’s tone as “calm, matter-of-fact, and dry” (200). This pitiless tone is partly responsible for the feeling of horror that seizes the reader at the end of the story. Indeed, while most contemporary detective fiction serves a didactic purpose by showing how criminals are caught, “The Cask of Amontillado” depicts a man who has successfully committed a premeditated murder and escapes punishment. Not only does Montresor feel no guilt, but he perceives his murder of Fortunato as a successful act of vengeance and punishment rather than crime.⁵ Montresor presents himself as a person who had the right to condemn Fortunato to death; he planned his murder as an act of execution. Why did Montresor “punish” Fortunato?

For many, “The Cask of Amontillado” seems to start in the middle of Montresor’s account: “The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge” (848). J.R. Hammond argues that Montresor’s revenge was caused by the thousand injuries he had received from Fortunato (89). Edward Wagenknecht makes a similar argument when he writes, “Poe carefully avoids specifying the ‘thousand injuries’ that

[Montresor] has suffered, and there is an absolute concentration upon the psychological effect” (161). These interpretations are untenable, for Poe clearly contrasts injuries and insult in his story: the cause of Montresor’s revenge was “insult,” not “injuries.” The narrator, however, never specifies the nature of this insult and thus puzzles Poe’s commentators further (Hoffman 223). In the words of May, “The reader has no way of knowing what these ‘thousand injuries’ and the mysterious insult are and thus can make no judgment about whether Montresor’s revenge is justifiable” (79). But is the reader indeed deprived of the possibility of judging whether the wrong done by Fortunato could warrant “capital punishment”?

Poe’s intriguing silence about the nature of the insult that made Montresor murder Fortunato has given rise to explanations of Montresor’s deed through insanity. Richard M. Fletcher, for example, maintains that Montresor’s actions are irrational and that therefore he is mad (167). Other critics share this view. In an annotation to “The Cask of Amontillado,” Stephen Peithman writes, “If there is any doubt that Montresor is mad, consider how he echoes Fortunato scream for scream, shrieking even louder than his victim” (174). In turn, Edward Hutchins Davidson writes,

We never know what has made him hate Fortunato nor are we aware that he has ever laid out any plan to effect his revenge.... There is nothing intellectual here; everything is mad and improvisatory—and Montresor succeeds just so far as he is able to adapt himself to a mad, improvisatory world. (201-202)

Stuart Levine considers Montresor mad since he “murders because of an unnamed insult” (72). In Levine’s opinion, “‘The Cask’ has no passage to tell the reader that the narrator is mad; the entire story does that” (80). Levine is certainly right in observing that there is no textual evidence of Montresor’s insanity. Therefore, one may add, there is no reason to assume it.

The argument about Montresor’s insanity rests upon the presupposition that insults ought to be differentiated and that only some of them are offensive enough to call for murder while others may be handled in a more civilized manner. The story, however, suggests a different interpretation of Montresor’s action. A significant detail in Montresor’s narration is the absence of an article in front of the word “insult.” This absence implies that the nature of the insult need not be named at all, because this “insult” is semantically contrasted with the “injuries” that Fortunato had done to Montresor. While “injuries” presuppose rivalry of socially equal enemies, “insult” involves contempt: that is, treating the other as a socially inferior person. To insult is, by definition, “to exult proudly or contemptuously; to boast, brag, vaunt, glory, triumph, esp. in an insolent or scornful way; to assail

with offensively dishonoring or contemptuous speech or action; to treat with scornful abuse or offensive disrespect” (*OED*, VII: 1057). Fortunato’s disrespect of Montresor, regardless of the form it takes, is a sufficient basis for Montresor’s vengeance. It follows then that the story does not start from the middle and that Montresor is not mad. Rather than implying the protagonist’s insanity, the first paragraph of the story delineates the conflict between the characters as arising from their social roles.⁶ A number of onomastic and semantic characteristics of the text indicate that “The Cask of Amontillado” is a story about the characters’ power relations and their social status.⁷

Hammond maintains that both characters “lead socially active lives” (221-222). This reading, however, contradicts a notable detail of the story: Fortunato can remember neither the coat of arms nor the motto of the Montresors. The display of family insignia was an indispensable part in the life of a socially prominent nobleman. Since a rich and powerful man such as Fortunato cannot remember the Montresors’ insignia, it is logical to assume that Montresor was not an active participant in the life of local aristocracy. Montresor’s inability to recognize a secret sign of the freemasons made by Fortunato and the latter’s remark, “Then you are not of the brotherhood” (851), also imply that Montresor is probably a bit of a recluse.⁸ Fortunato is definitely more powerful than Montresor who admits to this himself: “He [Fortunato] was a man to be respected and even feared” (848). Montresor’s other remark, “You are happy, as once I was. You are a man to be missed” (852), provides further grounds to believe that Montresor is no longer as rich and socially conspicuous as he used to be.

Although not as wealthy and powerful as his enemy, Montresor probably has a better aristocratic lineage than Fortunato. The catacombs of the Montresors are extensive and their vastness genuinely impresses Fortunato. In the catacombs, surrounded by the remains of Montresor’s ancestors, Fortunato realizes how powerful this family used to be. The protagonist’s name, “Mon-tresor” (my treasure) is a metaphor, for Montresor’s noble ancestry is indeed his treasure.⁹ Such assumption is all the more legitimate, since the word “treasure” usually refers to hidden riches and in Poe’s tale, the hiding place is the catacombs underneath Montresor’s palazzo. Furthermore, if Montresor has a better aristocratic lineage than Fortunato, the following lines become apprehensible: “Fortunato possessed himself of my arm.... I suffered him to hurry me to my palazzo” (849). It is not accidental that Montresor uses the verbs “to possess” and “to suffer” to describe his sensations. He “suffered” when his offender virtually led him to his palazzo because etiquette does not allow minor aristocracy the liberty of touching someone of more noble origin. At that point, however, Fortunato does not even remember that the

Montresors “were a great and numerous family” (850). He is a *Fortunato*, someone who becomes rich and prominent by chance (Fortune), rather than through personal virtue. The name of this character may derive from Fortunatus, “a hero of a popular European tale” who receives from Fortune a purse which can never be emptied and who is enabled to indulge his every whim (Barnhart 1603). The fortuitous ground of Fortunato’s social standing is uncovered in the course of Montresor’s sophisticated revenge.¹⁰

Being a descendant of a powerful aristocratic family, Montresor could not possibly let Fortunato insult him with impunity. The Montresors’ motto is “*Nemo me impune lacessit*” (“No one insults me with impunity”), and therefore, for Montresor, punishing his offender is a matter of honor, a matter of fulfilling his duty before his noble ancestry.¹¹ A description of the Montresors’ coat of arms also provides a clue for uncovering the motive for Montresor’s crime. “A huge human foot d’or, in a field azure; the foot crushes a serpent rampant whose fangs are imbedded in the heel” (Poe 851), which is the Montresors’ coat of arms, is a *mise-en-abyme*, for the protagonist destroys Fortunato, who metaphorically represents the serpent that has dared to attack Montresor. Fortunato may use his power to “injure” Montresor, but since he comes from a less prominent family, he has no right to insult Montresor.¹² In other words, the conflict between the two characters arises from the sensation of incongruity between their current social standing and their right to prominence by virtue of their origin.

Although at first glance it appears Montresor acknowledges Fortunato’s capability to distinguish fine wines, a careful textual reading uncovers how Montresor actually impugns Fortunato’s ability, further revealing Montresor’s sense of aristocratic superiority. Montresor exposes Fortunato’s inadequacy in every possible way:

He had a weak point—this Fortunato—although in other regards he was a man to be respected and even feared. He prided himself on his connoisseurship in wine. Few Italians have the true virtuoso spirit. For the most part their enthusiasm is adopted to suit the time and opportunity—to practice imposture upon the British and Austrian *millionaires*. In painting and in gemmary Fortunato, like his countrymen, was a quack—but in the matter of old wines he was sincere. In this respect I did not differ from him materially: I was skillful in the Italian vintages myself, and bought largely whenever I could. (848)

From this passage, we learn that while consciously practicing imposture upon tourists in matters of painting and gemmary, Fortunato genuinely considers himself knowledgeable in vintages. Montresor, however, does not share this opinion: he thinks that Fortunato’s “connoisseurship in wine” is a delusion and thus calls it his “weak point.” This passage is significant for understanding why Fortunato, who

prides himself on his ability to distinguish vintages, says that Luchesi "cannot tell Amontillado from Sherry" (849). Burton R. Pollin interprets this passage as Poe's error: "Even if Poe had not made the error about the Spanish origin of amontillado, I fear that he would have found it difficult to differentiate between sherry and amontillado, everywhere defined as 'pale dry sherry'" (36). Rather than considering Fortunato's words, "Luchesi cannot tell Amontillado from Sherry" (849), as the author's error, it is crucial to view them as a subtle means of characterization of Fortunato as unworthy of his reputation of a connoisseur in wine. Apparently, Fortunato does not know that Amontillado is a sherry.¹³ The reader can actually hear the mistake, which is otherwise unheard in a dialogue—namely, that Fortunato capitalizes the word "sherry" and uses it as a proper name rather than a generic term for several varieties of wine. Fortunato's mistake conveys his ignorance and arrogance.¹⁴

The seeming absence of the motive for Montresor's crime and its atrocity raise the question about the time of action in "The Cask of Amontillado." Some critics tend to read the story as a tale set in the Middle Ages or Renaissance. The carnival and the description of the family catacombs, also used as a wine cellar, would seem to strengthen such view. Nonetheless, two details in the story suggest that the action in "The Cask of Amontillado" takes place in the eighteenth or nineteenth century. Montresor wears a roquelaire, a cloak named after the Duke of Roquelaure (1656-1738). Roquelaire was a popular piece of clothing during the eighteenth century and the early part of the nineteenth (*OED*, XIV: 100), which means that the story is set no earlier than the eighteenth century but no later than the first half of the nineteenth century. Another detail that indicates the eighteenth or nineteenth century as the time of action in "The Cask of Amontillado" is a reference to wealthy tourists that visited the town.¹⁵ Montresor calls them "British and Austrian *millionaires*" (848). A new class of *nouveaux riches*, of whom Fortunato was probably one, became socially prominent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the earlier period, no nobleman would think of exercising "imposture" upon the bourgeoisie. In his study of the cultural and historical backgrounds of Poe's story, Richard P. Benton argues that the crime described by Montresor takes place right before the French Revolution, at the end of the eighteenth century. Since the key point in Benton's article is that the setting of the tale is French, he argues for the dating of the story before the Revolution because "both aristocratic privileges and the carnival had been abolished in France by 1796" (20). Although Benton's argument regarding the French setting of the story is debatable,¹⁶ his interpretation of the conflict between Montresor, "a proud but relatively

impoverished” aristocrat, and “the upstart Fortunato” is convincing (19). It is definitely a conflict that reflects social tensions of the capitalist period.

It seems that Montresor chose for his revenge “one evening during the supreme madness of the carnival season” (848) because his servants were not at home and because Fortunato was already exhilarated with wine¹⁷ and was an easy prey for Montresor. The carnival setting is also important because the traditional carnival symbolism helps Montresor undermine Fortunato’s position.¹⁸ The “madness of the carnival season” (848) in Poe’s story is “supreme” because carnival is not simply a temporary substitution of normal order by chaos, but its inversion. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin notes that during carnival festivities “the world [is] permitted to emerge from the official routine” (90). Jokes, excessive eating, drinking, and merry-making are tributes to “the honor of the time” (848). During carnival, identities are destabilized and traditional social hierarchy and etiquette collapse; the poor may be elected carnival kings, bishops, and popes, whereas representatives of the upper classes may disguise themselves as peasants, servants, or fools. It is not surprising then that Fortunato, a man of wealth and influence, is wearing a costume of a fool during the carnival: “He had on a tight-fitting parti-striped dress, and his head was surmounted by the conical cap and bells” (848). Fortunato’s carnival identity is a significant detail in the story, for Montresor’s plan is to make a fool of his enemy, to ensure Fortunato’s engagement in “a tragic farce.”¹⁹ Hence, Montresor’s sarcastic comment about Fortunato’s looks: “How remarkably well you are looking to-day!” (848). Further, Montresor makes another pun about Fortunato’s “foolish” looks: “And yet some fools will have it that his [Luchesi’s] taste is a match of your own” (849). Having chosen the role of a fool, Fortunato becomes socially inferior to Montresor who is wearing a black silk mask and a *roquelaire*, a costume that makes him resemble an executioner.

Space symbolism in “The Cask of Amontillado” also serves the purpose of undermining Fortunato’s social role. The action takes place in Montresor’s palazzo, a space that is new to Fortunato. Fortunato’s poor physical condition highlights his inadequacy. In a hostile space of Montresor’s family catacombs,²⁰ the victim’s gait becomes “unsteady,” his coughing becomes longer, and he has to lean upon Montresor’s arm (850-851).

For a long time, Fortunato does not notice that Montresor’s words and actions have double meaning. Fortunato says that he will not die “of a cough,” and the cunning Montresor agrees: “True—true” (852). “Producing a trowel from beneath the folds” of his cloak (851), Montresor mocks Fortunato’s membership in the Order of Masons. Fortunato also misreads the double meaning of the word

"Amontillado." Slowly making his way through the crypt, the foolish victim sees several signs testifying to a special meaning of "Amontillado." By making Fortunato try De Grève, Poe "no doubt means a pun on the word 'grave'" (Peithman 171).²¹ The whole imagery of the crypt suggests that the word "Amontillado" is a metaphor and evokes the meaning of the root of this word—*mons*, *montis*.²² The walls of the crypt "had been lined with human remains, piled to the wall overhead.... Three sides of this interior crypt were still ornamented in this manner. From the fourth the bones had been thrown down, and lay promiscuously upon the earth, forming at one point a mound of some size" (Poe 852). A mound of some size would be *monticula* or, by extension, *montilla*. Already fettered to the wall of the niche, Fortunato still does not understand the metaphorical meaning of the word "Amontillado." In the best tradition of fairy-tales, the culmination comes at midnight:

Now there came from out the niche a low laugh that erected the hairs upon my head. It was succeeded by a sad voice, which I had difficulty in recognizing as that of the noble Fortunato. The voice said —

"Ha! ha! ha!—he! he!—a very good joke indeed—an excellent jest. We will have many a rich laugh about it at the palazzo—he! he! he! — over our wine—he! he! he!" The Amontillado!" I said. "He! he! he!—he! he! he!—yes, the Amontillado."
(853-854)

Critics have interpreted this passage in a number of ways. According to Levine, "Fortunato tries to laugh off the entire affair as a prank" (85-86). Since the character is not actually laughing but is simply *saying* "Ha! ha! ha!" in a "low" and "sad" voice, the scene produces the effect of horror. In addition to interpreting the scene as Fortunato's futile attempt to present Montresor's actions as a joke, critics maintain that Fortunato's laughter and his incessant repetition of the word "Amontillado" give Montresor ground to believe that his victim finally realizes that "Amontillado" is a pun. Charles W. Steele makes an informed argument in favor of the metaphoric meaning of "Amontillado":

Rendered in English, the term means "Montilla-fied" wine. No other meaning does have relevance.... The Italian past participles *ammonticchiato* and *ammonticellato*, signifying "collected or formed into little heaps" are from two derivative forms of the verb *ammontare* (to heap up; Spanish: *amontonar*; past part. *amontonado*). The *ch* (k) and the *c* (ch as in chill) of the Italian past participles positioned as they are in their respective words and spoken rapidly would both approach our *j*. The *ll* of *amontillado* (variously like the *li* of *million* and the *y* of *yes*) when pronounced emphatically gives roughly the same result. Thus an apparent identity of sound exists for the untrained ear. (As Poe was taught Italian and Spanish at the same time in 1826 at Charlottesville by Professor

Blaettermann, a German, it is quite possible that he was not an expert on pronunciation.)

The implication of Montresor's pun may be understood as the pile of bricks he hastily threw to wall in Fortunato. As the climax of the story is reached, he causes his victim to repeat the word *amontillado*... a final time, as if to assure himself that his subtle and superior wit has been fully appreciated. (43)

According to Steele, Montresor gets an impression that Fortunato is able to understand the meaning of "Amontillado." If, as Kennedy writes, "for Montresor the drink has been from the outset a secret, figurative reference to death itself and in promising a taste of Amontillado, he has... been speaking of Fortunato's destruction" (141), the only way Fortunato may understand Montresor's pun is through devising associations between the name of the wine and Italian words. The name of the wine looks like the past participle of the Spanish verb *amontinallar*. Amontillado, thus, would mean "collected in a pile," "gathered in a mount," or "piled at the mountain." Although in modern Spanish there is no verb *amontinallar* (instead, there is the verb *amontonar*), in Old Spanish there was the verb *amontijar*. This means that it may not be necessary to explain similarities in the pronunciation of related Italian and Spanish verbs. Similarities in Romance languages allow us to believe that regardless of whether Fortunato knew Spanish, in the end of the story, he might realize that he himself is to become *amontillado*—a pile of bones gathered in a mount in Montresor's crypt.²³

Whether Fortunato actually understands the reason behind Montresor's terrible vengeance—namely, that he is being punished for his arrogance and for insulting someone who is equal or superior to him—does not impede a successful completion of Montresor's plan. Montresor "punishes" Fortunato "with impunity" and escapes retribution. Moreover, in accordance with his plan, Montresor does not murder Fortunato secretly, but stages a spectacle of execution so that the victim knows who kills him.²⁴ If Fortunato does not understand why Montresor has decided to kill him, he may believe Montresor is a madman. Typically, some scholars who argue that Montresor is insane turn to the last scene in the story. John Rea, for example, maintains that Montresor's action is "perversity, not revenge. If he had cared about revenge, instead of echoing Fortunato, his last words would have been something about the insult that he says Fortunato has given him" (qtd. in Peithman 174). A careful examination of Montresor's last words, however, provides additional evidence in support of the thesis that the motive for Montresor's murder of Fortunato has been vengeance. The very last words in the story are, "Against the new masonry I re-erected the old rampart of bones. For the half of a century no mortal has disturbed them. *In pace requiescat!*" The sentence "*In pace*

requiescat!" ("May he rest in peace") refers to Fortunato. The phrase is used in the Requiem Mass and during Last Rites, when, having listened to a dying person's confession, a priest forgives his/her sins. If Montresor's narration is his last confession, he should look forward to being forgiven and to hearing "*In pace requiescas!*" ("May your soul rest in peace") from his priest. Instead, Montresor maliciously subverts his role as a repentant sinner when he says "*In pace requiescat!*" in regard with Fortunato. Not only does he deprive the poor man of a Catholic's right to the last confession, he is arrogant enough to abuse the formulaic expression used by priests to absolve dying sinners. The fact that Montresor uses this expression for finally pardoning Fortunato highlights his conviction that he has merely avenged himself for the wrong that Fortunato afflicted upon him fifty years ago. ✱

Notes

I would like to thank Steven Taubeneck for discussing portions of this article with me. My special thanks go to the anonymous reviewers of this work whose insightful comments have led to significant improvements of both form and content.

¹ Edgar Allan Poe has long enjoyed the reputation of the founder of contemporary detective fiction. In three of his short stories, the detective Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin is the central character. See John Walsh (5, 82) on Poe's role in the development of modern detective fiction.

² Other scholars who argue that Montresor has failed to commit the perfect crime because he has suffered the pangs of remorse are Thomas Pribek, Walter Stepp, J. Gerald Kennedy, Charles May, and Scott Peeples. Writing a few years after Thompson, Kennedy argues that Montresor's feeling of guilt overtakes his retribution (141-143). Peeples discusses Kennedy's interpretation in detail and supports his reading of "The Cask of Amontillado" (148).

³ This is clear from Montresor's words, "For the half of a century no mortal has disturbed them [the bones]" (854).

⁴ Peeples agrees with the interpretation of the tale as a deathbed confession (150). William H. Shurr also discusses Thompson's hypothesis regarding Montresor's audience in "The Cask of Amontillado." In support of this hypothesis, Shurr quotes Benjamin Franklin's tale published a few years before Poe's story. In the tale, a Frenchman whose name is Montresor is very ill. His confessor believes Montresor may die soon and suggests he "makes his peace with God." Shurr argues that Franklin's tale is one of the sources for the story by Poe (28-29).

⁵ The significance of the vengeance theme in "The Cask of Amontillado" cannot be overlooked. David S. Reynolds maintains that the story has biographical resonance

with Poe's life: it "reflects Poe's hatred of two prominent New York literary figures, the author Thomas Dunn English and the newspaper editor Hiram Fuller" (93). Reynolds refers to earlier biographical studies of the story by Francis P. Demond and Marie Bonaparte: see Demond (137-146) and Bonaparte (505-506).

⁶ Much criticism focuses on Poe's use of symbols that enhance psychological portrayal of his characters. In the last decade, however, more studies have explored the immediate historical and social context of Poe's work: e.g., the reading of Poe's "House of Usher" by Leila S. May (387-396).

⁷ Some commentators suggest that the conflict between Montresor and Fortunato may be part of their blood feud. Such reading, however, cannot account for the fact that Fortunato willingly agrees to go to Montresor's residence to taste wine and talks with Montresor as if they were friends.

⁸ See a detailed discussion of the Freemasonic elements of Poe's story by Peter J. Sorensen (45-47); cf. Reynolds (99-100).

⁹ On the origins of the name Montresor, see E. Bruce Kirkham (23).

¹⁰ Graham St. John Stott provides a reading of the name "Fortunato" and of Poe's whole story in the light of the interpretation of God and virtue in Calvinism: "Fortunato means fortunate, wealthy, happy, or more generally, because of its derivation from the verb *fortunare*, blessed by the goddess *fortuna*, or random fate. Naturally, to embrace fortuna was unthinkable in the Reformed tradition. Fate was not random" (86). Montresor, according to Stott, is God's agent; he punishes Fortunato for representing ungodly ideas and qualities, the opposite of providence.

¹¹ The motto of the Montresor family may also be translated as "Let no one have insulted me with impunity." Typically, the motto refers to "insult," not "injuries." The Latin verb "laccessere" means to "provoke," "ill-treat," "challenge," "harass," and "bully"; Latin equivalents for the verb "to injure" are "nocere" and "laedere."

¹² Commentators have provided insightful interpretations of the Montresors' coat of arms including those who view the Montresors as represented by the serpent and those who argue that it is impossible to decide if the Montresor family is represented by the foot or by the snake. The latter interpretation is used in support of the argument that Poe's story is an exploration in the "circularity of revenge" (Kennedy 143). Peeples writes in this regard, "The Montresor family could be represented by the foot, which crushes its enemies, or the snake, which sinks its fangs into the heel of its adversary.... In either case, both the foot and the snake are injured, perhaps fatally (if the snake is poisonous); neither wins" (150). In Peeples' interpretation, the emphasis is on injuries. By contrast, if the Montresors' motto is to be taken into account ("No one insults me with impunity"), the emphasis in interpreting the coat of arms should be on retaliation.

¹³ Other principal types of sherry are Montilla, Manzanilla, Fino, and Vino de Pasto (Simon 483).

¹⁴ Burton R. Pollin refers to several sources on *Amontillado*: “For evidence that the name *amontillado* was applied to a fine, dry sherry in the 1840’s see Richard Ford, *Gatherings from Spain* (London, 1906), chap. xiv, which concerns the production of sherry wines; the book dates from 1846, being revised from *The Handbook for Travellers in Spain* (London, 1845)” (Pollin 240-241). Pollin also refers to the book by Walter James: *Wine: A Brief Encyclopedia* (New York, 1960): 8.

¹⁵ A popular tourist destination, Italy attracted many international tourists from across Europe and North America throughout the nineteenth century especially during carnivals. The last chapters of *Smoke* (1867) by Ivan Turgenev are set during the carnival in Venice in the second half of the nineteenth century.

¹⁶ Although Montresor is a French name, the story is set in Italy. This is clear from the sentences, “He prided himself on his connoisseurship in wine. Few Italians have the true virtuoso spirit” (848). Other details that also testify to an Italian setting are “palazzo,” “Italian vintages,” and Italian names of Fortunato and Luchesi. These details help to counter the argument by Burton R. Pollin, Stanley J. Kozikowski, and Richard P. Benton, who maintain that the setting of the tale may be French. See Pollin (31-35), Kozikowski (269-277), and Benton (19-25).

¹⁷ Several commentators interpret the story as a tale about the evils of excessive drinking. Pollin mentions “self-destructive drunkenness” (25) as the basic idea that Poe borrowed from Hugo. According to Arthur Hobson Quinn, Fortunato’s “craving for the wine has led him to his doom” (500). Jeffrey Meyers presents a similar argument: “There is a considerable amount of drinking in Poe’s stories. He usually describes its negative effects, with a moral disapproval that suggests he shared contemporary attitudes and was passing judgment on his own disreputable behavior. In one story a victim is lured by the offer of fine Sherry and then permanently sealed up in a catacomb filled with Amontillado” (87). It is hard to believe that Fortunato, a wealthy and powerful man, would be “lured” by the offer of alcohol from his less powerful countryman. Fortunato follows Montresor in order to show his connoisseurship of wines.

¹⁸ In “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel,” Mikhail Bakhtin discusses the difference between the use of carnival imagery during the Renaissance and by authors of the later period (such as Poe). In “The Cask of Amontillado,” the tropes of carnival are no longer used for asserting the “all-encompassing whole of triumphant life”; rather, they create “the denuded, sterile, and, therefore, oppressive contrasts” (199-200). Since Poe’s characters, one a representative of the old aristocracy and the other a new “aristocrat,” are most likely class enemies of the capitalist period, perception of the carnival by Poe’s protagonist who feels himself as an outsider among the rising bourgeoisie cannot be the same as the carnival consciousness in Rabelais’ *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532-1552), which Bakhtin discusses in *Rabelais and His World*.

¹⁹ A fool was always an important character in carnival performances. Fortunato, however, was not “engaged,” and this gave Montresor a chance to arrange a special “performance” for the *unlucky* fool.

²⁰ Used in the story in its original sense, the word “catacombs” refers to a subterranean cemetery of galleries with recesses for tombs.

²¹ Reynolds also notes that De Grève is a pun that points to Fortunato’s fate (97).

²² *Ad + montis* may mean “towards a mount.”

²³ The title of Poe’s story may be read as a metaphor. One of the readers of this paper has drawn my attention to the fact that the word “cask” may be interpreted as part of the pun that points out to Fortunato’s death. According to *OED*, in the past the word “cask” could mean “casket.” In turn, in the nineteenth-century America the word “casket” began to be used in the meaning of “coffin” (*OED*, 941). If the word “cask” in Poe’s story is to be associated with a coffin and if Amontillado is a pun on Fortunato’s terrible death, then the title “The Cask of Amontillado” may in fact stand for “The Casket of Fortunato.”

²⁴ The mask that Montresor is wearing highlights the association of the murder with execution. Executioners used to wear masks so that relatives or friends of the condemned could not find them.

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