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The Coercion of Virginia in “Berenice and “the Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar”

The closer art reflects reality, the less artistic it becomes. Art is most enticing when it mimics life as a wolf dressed in sheep’s clothing. The contrary is always a grave disappointment.

—*Anthony Marais*

Once you learn the details of Edgar Allen Poe’s personal life, it quickly becomes impossible to disconnect it from his literary work. It takes little creativity to elucidate how closely Poe’s literary creations thematically mimic his life experiences, or perhaps, vice versa. In some cases, these close connections provide logical rationale for the horrific shows put together by Poe. But in many instances, finding the reality within Poe’s gothic fictions only makes them more terrifying and abhorrent. One such biographical tidbit that has been the subject of considerable scholarship is Poe’s marriage to Virginia Clemm, his cousin who was 13-years-old at the time of their wedding. Virginia then contracted tuberculosis at the age of 20, and succumbed to it four years later, thus perfectly writing herself into Poe’s numerous stories of beautiful dying women. There’s no shortage of readings of Virginia, as well as discussions of Poe’s conceptions of femininity and the female role, in Poe’s classic dying-women stories, such as “Ligea,” “Fall of the House of Usher,” and “Berenice.”

However, I would like to propose the presence of Virginia in a more unlikely part of the Poe canon, “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar,” with Valdemar himself being a metaphor for Poe’s dying wife. To do so, I argue that Poe’s conception of women was so wildly romanticized that it limited his ability to explore the actual, nuanced, complicated, real-world problems and questions related to his own relationships with women through his writing. For this reason, in “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar,” he converted Virginia to a male figure out of necessity, who then became a conduit for exploring sexual violence and questions of consent between Poe and his child-bride, as well as the unromanticized reality of her degeneration through disease. When “Berenice” (1835) and “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” (1845) are viewed as a pair, the two tomes function as metaphorical bookends for Poe and Virginia’s relationship, elucidating changes in Poe’s conception of the relationship, as well as his more general conception of women. In conjunction, these stories both provide insight into what Peter Coviello describes as “the dysfunctions of intimacy in Poe” (877), which seem to originate in his personal life, and subsequently translate into his fiction.

Published in March of 1835, the very year Edgar and Virginia Clemm allegedly eloped, “Berenice” tells a story of male hyperfixation which ultimately leads to misogynistic violence. The story’s narrator, a chronically ill boy named Egaeus, finds the subject of his life-inhibiting monomania-inducing disease in his lively female cousin, Berenice. He recognizes the diminishing nature of his obsession, contending that he saw her “not as the living and breathing Berenice, but as the Berenice of a dream—not as a being of earth, earthly, but as the abstraction of such a being” (144). But soon, Berenice is overwrought with a sudden and unexplained illness, which has been read as the young girl’s entrance into puberty; as Dawn Keetly notes, “the narrator of ‘Berenice’ codes as disease what can easily be read as his cousin’s entry into

adolescence, sexuality, and even pregnancy,” thus forcefully repressing Berenice’s sexual maturity, as well as presenting it as a cause of degeneration and disgust (5). This sickness forces Egaeus to face the flawed, complicated reality of Berenice he had so emphatically been ignoring and can’t comprehend comfortably. After the onset of her sickness, he notes that “now I shuddered in presence, and grew pale at her approach” (144). Yet, “in an evil moment,” Egaeus decides to propose to the sick Berenice, noting that she had always loved him, and seeming to take pity on, as well as manipulate, the sick girl.

As his fiancée, Berenice’s horrific presentation seems only to exaggerate, engulfing her entire being, save her perfectly white, unblemished teeth (145). These teeth then become the subject of his extreme obsession and distaste; once he sees “the white and ghastly *spectrum* of teeth,” they “would not be driven away” from the “disordered chamber of [his] brain,” and Egaeus emphatically claims he “coveted them so madly!” (145). This fearful obsession with her teeth betrays a deeper fear of female sexuality. Suzanne Ashworth notes that “the mouth is associated with a full range of disgusting channels, fluids, and actions: oral sex, excessive eating, chewed food, saliva, phlegm, etc” (572). Thus, Egaeus’ hyperfixation on Berenice’s mouth implies a fixation on her ability for sexual consumption, while also paradoxically calling to mind her sexual purity, emphasized through the teeth’s perfect whiteness. Berenice’s burgeoning sexuality becomes a threat to Egaeus’ masculinity, as well as something he feels hauntingly drawn to and compelled to protect. At the end of the story, Egaeus (somewhat subconsciously) removes these “thirty-two small, white and ivory-looking substances” from Berenice’s momentarily dead body (which later revives, in true Poe fashion) (147). Symbolically, Egaeus neutralizes the threat posed by Berenice’s sexuality, while also taking ownership of it; confining the teeth to a box in his room, Egaeus manufactures a situation in which he can use them, behold

them, and keep them ‘safe’ as he pleases. Read sexually, “Berenice” becomes a story of men’s necessity to control female sexuality, through whatever violent means necessary.

In Poe’s actual life at this time, Virginia was presumably happy and healthy. Only 13, she was in a developmentally crucial stage of life, at the beginning of puberty, awaiting her transition into physical and mental maturity. In “Berenice,” through writing about inter-familial engagement as well as burgeoning sexuality, Poe explores his own relationship with Virginia; a 13-year old Virginia morphs from a lively young girl to a jaded, maturing woman, simultaneously encountering her own sexuality and her imminent union with her much older cousin. It takes little imagination to assume a similarly dark situation preparing to play out in Poe’s own marital bed with Virginia. The “evil moment” in which Egaeus proposes finds parallels in Poe’s own life as well; his engagement to Virginia was born of manipulation and lying, as Poe preyed on the young girl’s affection for him and relative lack of agency. In a letter to Virginia before their marriage, Poe writes, “My love, my own sweetest Sissy, my darling little wifey, thi[nk we]ll before you break the heart of your cousin. Eddy” (qtd. in Peebles, 68). Poe pushes a confusing array of adoring epithets on Virginia, then quickly switches to an almost threatening tone that suggests her responsibility for his own feelings. Like Berenice’s momentary death, puberty marks a symbolic death of childhood. Egaeus stealing Berenice’s teeth while she is dead parallels Poe marrying Virginia, and thus taking control of her life, while she is young and helpless, in a vulnerable, transitory stage. By marrying her at such a young age, Poe took possession of her freedom, her sexual potential, and her future.

However, we cannot ignore the fact that Berenice’s illness being puberty is only one interpretation of the story. Regardless of what the disease may be, it fits the typical 19th century definition of ‘consumption’; as Aspasia Stephanou explains, “Consumption was used widely to

signify any kind of illness that resulted in weight loss and death” as well as “the disease that...came to be known as tuberculosis” (39, 38). This extreme wasting away of the body, noted in the “startling changes wrought on the *physical* frame Berenice,” which resulted in her “very pale, and singularly placid” forehead and “hollow temples” (144-45), is paralleled in many of Poe’s other stories of dying women. However, this pattern was not unique to Poe, but represented a much larger cultural phenomenon of idealizing consumption and connecting it to women, as a means of demeaning and limiting them: “The construction of beautiful wasting bodies not only served to mask the materiality of the disintegrating body... but also to control and mark women as other” (Stephanou 37). Egaeus participates in this romanticizing of women’s sick bodies, choosing not to recognize the fleeting temporality of Berenice, but rather to fixate on, and then steal, her impenetrable and immortal teeth. Thus, we find Berenice’s malady to align with the ill-defined, yet ubiquitous condition of consumption, as well as Egaeus’ treatment of her illness reflecting misogynistic tools to control women characteristic of the 19th century.

Stephanou outlines the strong connection between women and tuberculosis during the nineteenth century, which parlayed into wider implications on conceptions of sick women, including their association with vampirism. Poignantly, the fixation with Berenice’s “long, narrow, and excessively white” (Poe 145) teeth only further proves that “the vampire, inhabiting marginal zones of existence, became the ideal figure to represent, and therefore through which to discuss, consumptive illnesses and tuberculosis” (Stephanou 40). Berenice’s disease also produced “alteration... in the *moral* condition of Berenice” (Poe 144), which reflects the belief that “the consumptive woman is also the embodiment of a fascinating evil that consumes her blood from within, while she develops into a spiritual being, negating the horrors of her flesh” (Stephanou 42). In agreeance, Peter Coviello speculates on the tight connection between women

and death in the “Berenice”: “figuring femininity as morbidity’s proper vehicle, the tale distances the terrors of morbid degeneration from the white men whose overwrought nervousness and acuity seem also to invite them” (892). While mentally ill himself, Egaeus doesn’t seem to face his own mortality as Berenice’s comes to an end; he contrasts his own condition and Berenice’s to selfishly shield himself from his life’s temporality, while remaining inconsiderate and unconcerned with Berenice’s actual well-being.

While “Berenice” both reflected and furthered a pattern of idealizing sick women in the 19th century, it no doubt, in true Poe fashion, takes interest and indulgence in the materially gothic aspects of Berenice’s death; Poe’s idealizing of women’s bodies romanticized, but doesn’t completely disregard, grotesque realities as medical discourse and pop culture of the 19th century typically did. Stephanou notes that Poe’s signature gothic style confronts the temporality of material people: “Matter penetrates the world of the ideal and reveals the inevitability of death, disintegration, and putrefaction. In this respect, Poe went against the dominant discourses... on consumption that sought to elevate spirituality and idealize materiality” (50). However, exemplifying Poe’s emphatic embrace of this “inevitability of death, disintegration, and putrefaction,” as well as his most direct address of tuberculosis in fiction, is not a story of a dying woman, but a dying man: “the Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar.” I argue that, despite centering around a man, this story provides further implications for Poe’s feelings about women, particularly elucidated through a comparison of Valdemar to his wife, Virginia. The imbueing of Virginia into a male character reveals the limitations Poe placed on the female body, and how these failed to include the reality of complicated human experiences. Further, the story has been read by many scholars as sexual, and oftentimes queer-coded; this adds another layer to the story’s implications on Poe and Virginia’s sexual relationship and its dysfunctional nature.

“The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” tells the story of grotesque scientific exploration; our narrator, named “P—” (surely *purposefully*), experiments with mesmerism, or hypnosis, at the moment of death, resulting in an entirely disgusting display. As scholars have noted, the exploration of mesmerism metaphorically conveys an exploration of sexual cravings, creating paradoxical connections between disgust and desire. This desire is focused on the subject of P—’s experiments, M. Valdemar, who Suzanne Ashworth establishes as queer-coded through his living situation, physical abnormalities, and unconventional geographical associations (576). The relationship between P— and Valdemar is close and potentially intimate, evidenced by the former’s addresses of a letter to “My Dear P—” (409). As Valdemar’s death becomes imminent, P— puts him under a mesmeric trance; he “continued the manipulations vigorously, and with the fullest exertion of the will, until I had completely stiffened the limbs of the slumberer” (411).

These vigours manipulations that result in stiffened limbs code the mesmerism as a sexual encounter between two men from its outset. Valdemar remains alive in the trance for only a few minutes, at which point his body viscerally changes; yellow fluid emits from his eyes, his cheeks dramatically reinflate, his mouth opens, and his blackened tongue hangs out between his jaws. Thus, “Two privileged elements of Valdemar’s body—pus from his eyes and his open mouth—threatened P with penetration and abjection”(Ashworth 571). Like in “Berenice,” Poe calls attention to the mouth, which, as we already noted, Ashworth discusses: “Essential to eating and sex, the mouth functions ubiquitously in the disgust response... Miller classifies the mouth (along with the vagina and the anus) as an ‘ingesting organ.’ And McGinn argues that ingestion drives disgust” (572). Poignantly bringing together disgust and sexual possibility, Valdemar’s mouth continues to be the only sign of his trance’s persistence, evident through the “vibratory movement of his tongue” whenever asked a question (413). For seven months, P— and his other

two doctors check on him daily, but leave him as such — stuck in a state completely out of his control, unable to rest, silent and still, somewhere between alive and truly dead. At length, the men decide to awaken Valdemar, an endeavor which results in the corpse's distressed yelling for relief and then the body's complete and fast decay into a "liquid mass of loathsome—of detestable putrescence," oftentimes read as signifying any variety of sexual fluids (414). This brings to mind that "sex enacts an exchange of otherwise disgusting substances (semen, sweat, saliva, vaginal fluids, etc.)" which entices "disgust [to] often infiltrate social conceptions of sexuality" (577). Thus, "the Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" tells the story of disgusting indulgence in queer sexual desires.

The story also plays with questions of communication, and in conjunction with it's eroticism, consensual sex. Before enacting the experiment, P— takes careful consideration to confirm he has the explicit consent of Valdemar, noting that "I begged him to state, as distinctly as he could do, to [the medical student], whether he (M. Valdemar) was entirely willing that I should make the experiment of mesmerizing him in his then condition" (410). Clear consent is paramount to P—, requiring a witness and nothing less than entire certainty. Once under the trance, communication continues, as Valdemar answers questions, confirming he is asleep and dying. Then, as Valdemar dies, but still remains in this trance, he still manages to speak, but this time with a "harsh, and broken and hollow" noise, seeming to imminent from a "vast distance," and impressing P— "as gelatinous or glutinous matters impress the sense of touch" (413). This communication transcends that of typical worldly existence, crossing into a new realm that disturbs its witnesses and participants. Particularly analyzing the corpse's vibrating tongue, this phenomenon has been read as a commentary on the newly created telegraph and the possibilities

for communication through technological developments. Regardless, the communication is novel and untrustworthy, as “no similar sounds have ever jarred upon the ear of humanity” (413).

For seven months, only this vibrating tongue, teasing its onlookers, separates Valdemar from the grasp of complete death. As P— begins awakening the corpse from its mesmerized state, its tongue starts yelling, rejecting the body’s liminal state between animation and stillness: “For God’s sake!—quick!—quick!—put me to sleep—or, quick!—waken me!—quick!—*I say to you that I am dead!*” (414). “Thoroughly unnerved,” P— continues his process of awakening Valdemar “amid ejaculations of ‘dead! Dead!’ absolutely *bursting* from the tongue and not from the lips of the sufferer” (414), which further sexualize the situation. Notably, Valdemar no longer seems content with his participation in the experiment, yet has been unable to express himself sufficiently in months. The questionable validity of the mesmerized corpse’s ability to communicate seems to undermine the overly specific necessitation of consent prior to mesmerization. Thus, the story asks what true consent means, particularly if the consenting individual may not understand the stipulations of their agreement fully, and may not be able to accurately rescind their consent.

Taking into account the story’s sexual undertones (or perhaps just tones), we get something alongside a rape narrative, a grotesque crossing of personal boundaries. Thus, the taboo sexual engagement in the story also becomes rape, or at least assault. Mesmerism itself opens the door for such assault and coercion, as it provides a means by which to bodily control other people while they are in a state of relative vulnerability. Further, “the mesmerists’s sensations and yearnings surged through his patients” (Ashworth 583). Feelings, expressions, and movements in the mesmerized body reflect not the individual’s own true subjective experience and passion, but those of their controller.

Circling back to Poe's personal life, "Valdemar" was published in December of 1845, roughly three years after Virginia's diagnosis of tuberculosis, and just over a year before she fully succumbed to the disease. With this being one of Poe's few instances of dealing with tuberculosis by name, along with the similarities in the names of Valdemar and Virginia, a connection becomes evident between the two. At this point, Poe had likely participated in many conversations concerning Virginia's worsening tuberculosis, perhaps providing inspiration for such discussions in "Valdemar." Furthermore, the men's close connection and rapport could only reflect a handful of Poe's relationships, with the longest and most consistently close being Virginia and her mother, Muddy.

Nevertheless, while similarities in name and disease draw Valdemar and Virginia closer together, their difference in gender seems to still set them far apart. However, recent studies on the queer elements of Poe's canon, such as Ashworth's, lend a hand in deconstructing the gender binary written into his work. Particularly, according to Ashworth's definition, "queer describes bodies that exist outside binary, heterosexual, procreative, and conventionally human frameworks" (575), which suggests possibilities beyond just homosexuality, including gender fluidity. Thus, the story's sexually charged implications are not distinctly homosexual so much as they are non-conventional and taboo. On this basis, we can open up the possibilities of Poe exploring not just romance with another man, but rather any sexually deviant or societally abhorrent actions and situations, perhaps even incestual relationships between cousins, or pedophilic dalliances with young, vulnerable women. I argue that Poe created Valdemar as a vision of Virginia out of necessity, using this story to explore the dirty realities of his wife's disease and demise. Because of Poe's notion that beautiful, dying women are the *most* romantic topic, it seems obvious that he wouldn't attempt to impactfully convey disgust and decay through

a dying woman. Written as Virginia's death by tuberculosis swiftly approached, Poe could no longer convincingly convey Virginia as one of his romantic, undead feminine ideals of sickness; Virginia necessitated a depiction beyond the confines of Poe's limited definition of femininity.

All things considered, "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" becomes a narrative of Poe's violent and manipulative assault and harassment of Virginia. Mesmerization, then, metaphorically represents marriage, a tactic which left Virginia stuck with Poe and his unreliable income, demeanor, and habits. Regardless of whether the couple ever consummated their marriage, my reading of this story suggests some level, at least symbolically or imagined, of physical intimacy. However, with Poe's position of manipulative power over Virginia, "Valdemar" sheds light on the immorality of the couple's relationship, sexual or not. Despite the fact that Virginia was affectionate for Poe and seemed to desire their union as much as he did, she was only 13, forced into a corner and robbed of the chance to freely decide. In our modern society, after all, consent is not considered viable when one of the parties is not of age. With Poe twice as old as his barely pubescent wife, it's not difficult to imagine the pressure and lack of choice Virginia felt in her marriage. However, it feels unlikely that Poe would present himself as culpable for something so demeaning as the rape or assault of his beloved 'sissy.' But does Poe truly present P— as responsible for what happens to Valdemar? Or is he just a passionate experimenter who never would have expected the horrific outcomes of his endeavors? Perhaps, even, the revulsion experienced by the entire company around Valdemar's dead, but mesmerized, and subsequently dissolved, body reflects Poe's own disgust at Virginia. Like a tissue, perhaps Virginia has become disgusting once used by Poe, to whatever degree his "use" reached. However, since Virginia still remains as Poe's beautifully dying wife, he can only explore his distaste through a reimagination of Virginia as a much older man.

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