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Shifting Tides, Anxious Borders Conference

"The wretchedness of earth is multiform": Trance and (Trance) formation in Poe's "Berenice"

The apparent sequence of the horrific short story "Berenice" fits easily into author Edgar Allan Poe's overall canon and is congruent with Poe's thematic milieu. The story of narrator Egaeus' rapid mental deterioration and symptomatic monomania, functioning as hyper-attentiveness, causes him to turn violent towards his cousin, Berenice, the story ending with Egaeus' grotesque extraction of Berenice's teeth. It is a classic descent into madness seen commonly in Poe's other texts such as "The Tell-tale Heart" and "The Black Cat." "Berenice," however, is part of Poe's so-called "marriage group," the other two texts being "Ligeia" and "Morella," which have been problematic for critics because of their graphic depictions of female victimization.¹ Egaeus' fits uncomfortably into this mold, leaving critics to question the role and function of women in Poe's writing. Poe's reference to the situation in his own "Philosophy of Consolation" says that "the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world (575)," illustrating Poe's aesthetic dichotomy of extremes: the traditional sense of beauty (the woman) against the traditional sense of repugnance (death). Yet given Poe's bold declaration of the subject, his admitted interest positions "Berenice" as a text worthy of more inquiry to the situation, the characters, and how the events occurred.

Focusing on the depiction of women, critics have inquired about Poe's violent handling of women in his texts. Scholar Kristen Renzi, focusing on the story's depiction of hysteria in relation to historical records of the disease, claims "'Berenice' could be viewed more

provocatively as a depiction of the damage done to female characters when male characters, using patriarchal rubrics, attempt both to earnestly understand such females and to fearfully reject knowledge about these same characters when it troubles them" (631). Also, Aspasia Stephanou connects the story's treatment of the female body to patriarchal fears of femininity, arguing "The contemplation of this hideous synthesis of matter and spirit is exemplary of Poe and the narrator's fears of feminine resistance and evil; an evil whose symptoms are manifested in the consumptive female body" (50). Finally, Jenny Webb claims that Berenice exists as a reoccurring figure of aesthetic undecidability for Poe: "The dying woman in Poe embodies both an aesthetic crisis—how to represent feminine vitality without damaging the original—as well as a crisis of interpretation—how do we avoid the destructive misreadings seemingly inherent in relationships where desire both waxes and wanes?" (216). Considering the previous, the feminist direction of these critics is a common reading of the text's horror, so too is the medical-based evaluation of Berenice's epilepsy. However, these avenues, while fruitful, simply do not take into account Egaeus' own medical situation within the text. Focusing on the symptoms of Berenice prevents an honest appraisal of Egaeus' motives and ignores a genuine understanding of his actions. To simply explain his assault through means of monomania, first, involves believing a character that is highly unreliable ("I, living within my own heart, and addicted, body and soul, to the most intense and painful meditation") and, second, offers no rational reasoning to how Egaeus is physically able to extract the teeth (582). Knowing his background, "I, ill of health, and buried in books," and formative years, "I loitered away my boyhood in books," it seems unreasonable to think that Egaeus could literally pull off such an atrocious act, while the text asks readers to believe monomania as the cause of his freak ability. Considering this unbelievable request, I hope to show that the story offers hints about Egaeus' connection to

spiritualism, trance-like states, and altered consciousness, offering an alternative reasoning to his own unreliable admission. Being that text has intrinsic examples of supernaturalism, Egaeus' trance allows him freedom from his feeble character and understandable access to the barbarism and monstrosity needed to commit his violent act.

Trance, in the sense of both spiritualism and religious spiritualism, exists as a rather complex and debated phenomena. The actual nature of trance is debated firstly on the grounds of its definition and terminology, as Hermetic Philosophy scholar Wouter Hanegraff claims in his overview of trance: "Unusual psychophysiological conditions are a routine occurrence in many religious contexts, but there is no consensus about the vocabulary that should be used in discussing them" (511). The most important problem of trance is exactly *what it is* because "we lack a comprehensive and generally accepted theoretical framework" (Hanegraff 512). Still, the simplest understanding of trance involves some level of connection to spirits, that trance opens up the agent to spiritual connection to something else, often the dead. Sometimes called mediumship and divination, trance also can involve numerous physiological details, like fervor and euphoria, while exhibiting traits like mania and altered consciousness—the latter two traits being of particular importance to this examination. In medical terms, trance is "the interaction between two complementary neurological complexes," between the sympathetic nervous system and the parasympathetic nervous system, that results in "neurological phenomena [...] experienced subjectively as ecstatic or altered states" (Hanegraff 512). While trance is understood in medical terms, the critical response to trance still remains neglected due to the medical community's distrust of trance's spiritual dimensions. As much as the medical community attempts to categorize and define trance, mediumship always had exhibited spiritualist tendencies which the science community has yet to firmly establish as legitimate. In

Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experiences from Wesley to James, religion historian Ann Taves addressed this situation, saying: "educated elites are typically depicted as explaining away religious experience in abstract terms, while ordinary people, embedded in traditions of faith and practice, are depicted as having them" (4). Indeed, trance and religious experience still continue today, practiced by large religious communities, all the while misunderstood by science. The opportunity to examine trance in "Berenice" offers an alternative to the common medical discourse and provides an avenue distanced from the elitist ignorance of religious experience. Just because spiritualism is largely doubted does not mean texts cannot depict mediumship—especially since spiritualism was prolific during the nineteenth century.

The Spiritualist movement in the nineteenth century operated largely under the growing religious fervor of early American Protestants who focused on Christian encounters and depictions of spiritual encounters. Biblical stories like Jesus' raising of Lazarus influenced many early Christians to believe in their own power to manipulate spirit. This, along with the influence of esotericism, created a fervor in nineteenth century America that promoted spiritual connection. Early examples of spiritualism were found in camp meetings of Presbyterians, Methodists, and Separate Baptists who believed in harnessing spirit to intensify the glorification of God. Known as *shouting Methodists*, reports of Methodist camp meetings, 1804, involved prayer and sacralization of the body, especially in Virginia. Although popular, camp meetings, particularly in the Methodist tradition, would become passé towards the middle of the century, often viewed as a "manifestation of 'old-fashioned' or 'old-time' Methodism" (Taves 117). Further, in 1837, *animal magnetism* surfaced as a phenomenon in New England after Frenchman Charles Poyen gave lectures and demonstrations in Providence. From there, clairvoyants and

somnambule continued giving demonstrations—much to the interest of scientists and scholars of religion—of mesmerism which included "mental excitement, sympathy, delusion, extreme sensibility, disease of the nervous system" (Taves 122). The medical elite largely rejected mesmerism as what they called *enthusiasm*, but the popularity of these demonstrations soon interested many due to the unexplainable nature of altered consciousness. The distinctive feature of animal magnetism, unexplainable by the medical community, was the "distinctive 'state' in which 'the mental energy of one person [acts] upon the mind of another" (Taves 122). Taves claims that "This postulated 'state' with its accompanying powers or abilities played a central role in both constituting and explaining religious experience at a popular level during the nineteenth century" (122), that "animal magnetism opened a psychologically grounded and empirically verifiable doorway between the human world and a world of spirits" (207). It was not until the late 1870s and 1880s that the American medical establishment sought to legitimize itself by confronting the proliferation of spiritualism. It was neurologist George M. Beard, though, who attacked the practice of trance most thoroughly. Beard called trance a "frequently occurring functional disease of the nervous system, in which the cerebral activity is concentrated in some limited region of the brain, the activity for the rest of the brain for the time being is suspended" (67). His outright rejection of trance as a religious experience removed trance away from the guise of occultism and religious fervor, and towards the disciplines of psychology and physiology where trance was understood using theories of the subconscious (Taves 211). By including this brief survey of spiritualism in America, I hoped to establish the presence of trance and spiritualism as a pervasive influence in America, one that I will use to argue trance as a significant element in "Berenice." Trance's religious and spiritual explanations, fortunately, will not be anachronisms in our evaluation of Poe, for psychological explanations of trance were not

available until the late nineteenth century, long after Poe's death in 1849. While Poe was alive, east-coast America was firmly aware of spiritualism and trance experiences, and considering Poe's reoccurring supernatural trope, it seems likely he was conscious of America's spiritual fascination, and perhaps was fascinated himself.

Turning then to the text, "Berenice" has only one explicit reference to trance. Egaeus describes Berenice's epilepsy as "not unfrequently terminating in *trance* itself—trance very nearly resembling positive dissolution, and from which [Berenice's] manner of recovery was, in most instances, startlingly abrupt" (582). Beyond Poe's italic formatting of the word, trance stumbles around as a characteristic of Berenice's disease, seemingly overlooked as another detail of her multisymptomatic epilepsy. Egaeus is quick to distance himself from Berenice's maladies in the immediate next sentence, "In the meantime, my own disease..." but Egaeus, too, has visions, "The realities of the world affected me as visions, and as visions only" (582). The similarity of both maladies lessens the distance often seen between the characters: while Berenice is "agile, graceful," Egaeus is "ill of health, and buried in gloom" (582). Critics like Aspasia Stephanou, in her article "Lovely Apparitions and Spiritualized Corpses: Consumption, Medical Discourse, and Edgar Allan Poe's Female Vampire," have noted the gendered violence present not only in "Berenice," but in many of Poe's other texts. Stephanou, in particular, views Poe's gendered violence as representative of male nineteenth century fears of the female body. While Stephanou uses Poe's "Ligeia" as her model, "Berenice" offers the same model of male fear and female bodily obsession. Berenice's teeth, a symbol of her power, causes Egaeus to react violently, and by assaulting Berenice and extracting her teeth, Egaeus gains his dominance and absent masculinity. Although this reading of Egaeus and Berenice as enemies is valid, the differences between the two are not as significant as they seem to be. First, as stated before, they

share similarities in vision or trance-like symptoms. Second, Berenice's epilepsy is mirrored by Egeus' symptomatic loss of control. One of monomania's symptoms is "to lose all sense of motion or physical existence, by means of absolute bodily quiescence and obstinately persevered in" (583). Does this symptom not function like Berenice's epilepsy? Indeed, it does, and there are more similarities between the perceived characters despite critical attempts to separate them based upon gender. After all, their marriage acquiesces quickly despite Egeus' fear of Berenice, "shuttered in her presence, and grew pale at her approach [...] and, in that evil moment, I spoke to her of marriage," and he feels no feelings for her, "most surely I had never loved her" (584). In marriage, both characters connect and reconcile a perceived gendered distance between them, and in general, the characters are linkable based upon multiple criteria. With that being said, I am not suggesting that Egeus and Berenice are the same person, or figments of one another's minds, as some critics have suggested.² I believe they are more similar than separate; and building upon this, I now revisit my original direction of the operation of trance in the story.

Egeus' visions are not the only time he loses consciousness; in fact, Egeus, as a character, has multiple moments of sensory lapses. In addition to "los[ing] all sense of motion" (583), he experiences the loss of his faculties at the end of section two. Berenice enters the room, "uplifting my eyes, I saw that Berenice stood before me," and Egeus' enters into a vision of some sort, "Was it my own excited imagination—or the misty influence of the atmosphere—or the uncertain twilight chamber—or the gray draperies which fell around her figure—that caused in it so vacillating and indistinct an outline?" (584). All ready, Egeus hints at the beginning of a supernatural experience; the inability to distinguish Berenice implies Egeus' entering into a trance-like state where his faculties of sight and perception are diminished. The section ends with Egeus entering into a trance after seeing a grotesque vision of grotesque Berenice, and after the

section break, Egaeus regains consciousness after hearing Berenice exit the room. More important is the missing gap in sequence between when Egaeus sees Berenice and when he regains consciousness—what happened to him between when he is conscious of Berenice and when he awakes? The text itself does not offer much explanation beyond Egaeus' continued obsession and memory of the teeth. It is this gap in which the events remain unknown that invokes the notions of trance. While the situation could be interpreted as Egaeus passing out due to fear, this gap in events (and textual section break) appears again in the text, supporting the trance explanation. When Egaeus is in his chamber, after sleeping through the second night, he awakes and, upon leaving the library, a servant tells him of Berenice's death in the early morning and that her burial preparations are complete (585). Then there is another section break, followed by "I found myself sitting in the library, and again sitting there alone" (585). Again, there is a gap in the sequence of events, but here the reader is aware that, during the gap, Egaeus extracts Berenice's teeth. Like the previous section break, Egaeus loses consciousness and leaves a gap of events initially unknown, though the text does draw attention to Egaeus' social condition before and after trance. Before, Egaeus is in the presence of Berenice and the servant maiden, while after, Egaeus is alone, "and *again* sitting there *alone*" (585, italics added). The social nature of the trances calls into question the actual function of Egaeus' trances—that is, his trances function as a means to connect with something other than humanity. Egaeus is a misanthrope and enfeebled man. Near the beginning, Egaeus says of his genealogy "Our line has been called a race of visionaries," and on one hand, ironically, Egaeus will never achieve the success of his ancestors, while on the other, Egaeus *literally* is a visionary because of his ability to see visions. This clever wordplay aside, Egaeus is only remarkable because of his trances and, to some degree, his assault—which are intimately linked.

Most importantly, beyond the social aspects, Egeus' trances allow him to access the brutality needed to assault Berenice. Trance, at its most simple and accepted, is one connecting to a spirit, accompanied by sensory lapses and losses of consciousness. Egeus fits the latter criteria easily, as he experiences obvious lapses in consciousness between the section breaks; but what spirit does he connect to? What does he connect with? The answer is not obvious, at least textually, as the text mentions no connection to a particular spirit. However, the second trance is the most important. Initially, the teeth extraction raised questions about the validity of Egeus' physical prowess, but trance is the answer to these doubts. Egeus does not enter into a *typical* trance involving spirits of the dead. Instead, he connects with a spirit of barbarism and brutality, firmly allowing him to extract the teeth without question of physical ability. Ironically, Berenice is not the monster of the story—Egeus is, as illustrated by his transformation from unsuccessful and ailing to violently deranged.

Making sense of Egeus' transformation requires Poe's understanding of how one becomes monstrous. Poe's male protagonists, including Egeus, are situated comfortably within Romantic and Victorian depictions of the supernatural. Scholars Anne Stiles, Stanley Finger, and John Bulevich have concluded that, due to the popularity of monsters in nineteenth century literature, supernatural beings are the manifestations of authors' anxiety over the growing medical community (790). In particular, nineteenth century authors faced an institution that claimed it had disproved dualism, that the commonly believed concept of the soul as the moral center was incompatible with scientific findings. Stiles, et al. see this anxiety manifested through cases of trance and sleepwalking in British author John William Polidori's literary monster, the vampire: "vampires embody the most frightening implication of nineteenth-century neurology: the possibility that humans might be soulless automata" (790). Their claims transfer well to Poe's

own depictions of trance and offer an explanation to the motive behind Egaeus' characterization. Egaeus begins as a moral, albeit isolated, character that through trances and visions becomes an immoral character. Note that, despite all of Berenice's physical changes, she is never harmful or violent, and it is the meager Egaeus who transforms, warning the reader of how easily innocent members of society have the capacity to become evil. Professor Alex Link also isolates this fear as Poe's central trait for the characterization of his monsters. Link points to *Eureka: An Essay on the Material and Spiritual Universe* to first identify Poe's beliefs on materialism, "Poe adheres to certain specific claims throughout his treatise, a key one being the extension of material substance to encompass all, including the spiritual domain," (259) then applies this notion to the anxiety behind supernatural manifestations, "Like ghosts, but inversely, zombies, vampires, and their soulless ilk support the anxious belief in the possibility of the soul by serving as the nightmarish representation of its absence" (259). Link's claims inform how to—ultimately—understand Egaeus, literally and figuratively.

Egaeus' transformation is a manifestation of Poe's anxiety towards the inevitable presence of evil in humanity in light of science's rejection of the soul. The evil present in Egaeus is a warning, a figurative reference to the supposed absence of a human soul. The susceptibility of Egaeus to trance, visions, and transformation serve as a warning to the nineteenth century reader of a foreboding future, one where humans can become monsters and attack innocents. "Berenice" is Poe's dark vision of a world where science has claimed that anyone can be evil, anyone can be a monster, that we all can transform into something inhuman—whether we want to or not.

Notes

1. For information on the "marriage group," see Hoffman, Daniel. *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe*. Garden City: DoubleDay & Company, 1972. Print.
2. See Dayan, Joan. "The Identity of Berenice, Poe's Idol of the Mind." *Studies in Romanticism* 23.4 (1984): 491–513. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 3 March. 2016.

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