

Richard Kopley

EDGAR ALLAN POE AND THE DUPIN MYSTERIES (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008)

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Reviewed by Louis Renza

As editor of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1999) and of a collection of essays on it (*Poe's Pym: Critical Explorations* [1992]), Richard Kopley has proven himself a distinguished critic of Poe's works. His new book sheds truly original light on the newspaper sources of Poe's famous "tales of ratiocination": "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt," and "The Purloined Letter." For the benefit of readers, the volume appends all three tales plus their textual variants after Kopley's individual and comparative analyses of them. The book's overall presentation of Poe's "mysteries" makes it an indispensable resource for scholars and critics. Moreover, unlike John T. Irwin's brilliant but often idiosyncratic criticism of Poe's detective fiction in *The Mystery to a Solution* (1994), Kopley's book is couched in a jargon-free style that will help to make it useful for teachers and accessible for students of all stripes and levels.

Many critics have discussed "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," especially for its putatively inaugurating the genre of detective fiction. Since the era of French poststructuralism and its critical affiliates, just as many critics—notably Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Barbara Johnson and subsequent critical annotators to their analyses—have focused their attention on the third tale, "The Purloined Letter," particularly as an allegory of the phallus and/or signifier. To Kopley's credit, he also gives full critical attention to the one tale that even most Poe critics tend to underestimate: "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt."

For Poe's three tales, appropriately enough, Kopley proposes three critical methods. First, he suggests a "neo-formalist" reading of them, by which he means closely scrutinizing certain thematic

patterns and verbal clues dropped throughout the tales. Seen through this critical lens, each tale displays a chiasmic symmetry (ab:ba) or verbal crossing comprised of “corresponding language clusters” that frame a verbal “center.” In “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” the tale pivots around the decapitated nail, with its pun on “clue” (Irwin’s original surmise) and the commonplace phrase “nailing it down”; in “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt,” the tale pivots around the words “equal”; and in “The Purloined Letter,” the pivot is “an exchange . . . of the precious letter for a check” (8,10,16,20).

Kopley also finds word play galore camouflaged in the three narratives. In “The Purloined Letter,” for example, Dupin speaks about a rebus: words spread as if invisibly across a “chart,” and therefore likely to go undetected. For Kopley, this same verbal puzzle finds its double in Poe’s very tale. Thus, Dupin explains his procedure for finding the “purloined letter” by using the example of the children’s game where one schoolboy tries to guess another’s choice of odd and even. To win the game or find the letter, one must be able almost literally to identify with the other. Kopley regards this game as the “*mise en abime* for the entire work” (21). That is, just as Dupin identifies with the Minister in order to retrieve the letter, so Kopley’s close reader does the same with Poe, the tale’s author. Such a reader will note, for example, how the word “odd” is repeated in the first part of “The Purloined Letter” but drops out in the second, where it gets replaced by “even” (22). But in his most notable word game, Poe inscribes his own name in these three tales, something he also does in other tales, as I and other critics have noted before. Thus, following David Ketterer’s surmise about Poe’s self-inscription in “The Fall of the House of Usher,” Kopley notes that “at the center of ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’ appear the words ‘*riddle*’ and ‘*unriddled*’--I take the double ‘d’s to signify ‘Eddy’” (12).

If Kopley’s “formalist” analysis of the three mystery tales tracks old New Critical modes, it also strays from them in suggesting that Poe’s intentional act shapes the tales’ structural symmetry and “biographical” thematic. An analogous “heresy” applies to Kopley’s most notable achievement: his use of “genetic” criticism—his second critical method-- to identify the largely journalistic sources that Poe likely used to help compose these tales. Newspapers self-evidently play a major part in “The Mystery of

Marie Rogêt,” where Dupin, Poe’s detective figure in the earlier “Murders in the Rue Morgue,” becomes a barely disguised figure of Poe himself. Using actual newspaper reports about a then very sensational crime, the murder of a cigar-store worker in New York City named Mary Rogers, Dupin guesses at Marie’s killer: a secret lover in the navy. In the second version of the tale, which appeared in 1845, Poe tried to make it more fictional, mostly because of a death-bed confession supposedly made by someone other than a naval officer. Eventually, therefore, Poe wrinkled the parallel between the cases of “Marie Rogêt” and “Mary Rogers.”

W. K. Wimsatt, T. O. Mabbott, and John Walsh have all cited evidence from contemporary newspaper accounts to show that Poe largely followed various reports of the crime except in the tale’s sixth excerpt, which reports the discovery of a rudderless boat in the Seine (a.k.a. Hudson) River. That discovery, of course, had prompted Dupin’s initial surmise about the involvement of the naval officer. Kopley, however, has found evidence that Poe didn’t invent this excerpt, and that he drew on other newspaper stories, including one about another woman’s murder and other articles stating that Mary Rogers wasn’t even dead. Kopley follows this tangled web of sources right down to what Poe construed as one newspaper editor’s animus toward him for having negatively reviewed *Powhatan*, a book written by the editor’s friend. In effect, Poe used Dupin against H. Hastings Weld, the editor of the *Brother Jonathan* paper, who had written that Mary Rogers a.k.a. Marie Rogêt still lived. Dupin’s refutation of an “editorial from *L’Etoile*,” writes Kopley, “seems a partial displacement of Poe’s response to Weld’s judgment of the *Powhatan* review” (60). Revenge, therefore, a repressed aspect of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and an explicit one in “The Purloined Letter,” also inflects the otherwise non-fictional “Mystery of Marie Rogêt.”

Kopley claims to have arrived at this conclusion by identifying with “Poe as a reader” (63), that is, as a reader of the newspaper articles in question. This defines the critical tack he takes into his archival

excavations of the other two Poe mystery tales. Moving beyond the sources that T. O. Mabbott cites in his introduction to “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (*Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, Volume 2, 1978), Kopley draws our attention to “an important series of pieces that appeared in May-December 1838 in a long-neglected newspaper, *The Philadelphia Saturday News and Literary Gazette*” (29), to which Poe had ready access. One such piece was “titled simply ‘Orang Outang’”; in another article, with wording that is sometimes exactly reproduced in Poe’s “Murders,” a black man named Coleman is reported to have killed his wife with a razor in much the same gruesome way that Poe’s ape kills Madame L’Espanaye (31 ff.). Though Kopley notes in passing the racism implied by this correspondence (34), what really intrigues him is Poe’s reading of the textual sources which, thanks to Kopley, we too can now examine.

Kopley distinguishes the contemporary sources of both “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” from the historical as well as autobiographical sources of “The Purloined Letter.” As I have already noted, many recent critics have framed this tale within various “post-” allegorical contexts. For that matter, one can easily ask what ideological ends it serves. Given its “royal” actors, does the tale constitute a defense of hierarchical order, with Dupin saving the Queen from the Machiavellian Minister D___or, conversely, does it expose the egregiously manipulative practices of all those in political power? Side-stepping such questions, Kopley attempts to tie Poe’s tale to a specific historical incident.

This incident turns out to have nothing to do with French royalty, as some critics have speculated (66), or indeed with intimations of the French Revolution, even though, near the end of the tale, Dupin instigates a quasi-street riot in the Parisian neighborhood where the Minister resides so as to distract him from Dupin’s switching of letters. Setting aside both French politics and French royalty, Kopley argues that the story specifically refers to the “political intrigue” surrounding the plight of the popular Princess and then Queen Caroline, as she was belittled and eventually accused of adultery by her royal consort, George IV. This series of events occurred right around the time when a very young Poe and the Allans

resided in England between 1815 and 1820, and when the issue of Queen's Caroline's "uncertain fate" had become a matter of popular discussion even in the United States and after Poe had begun his literary career (69). Further tightening the link between Poe's tale and the queen's plight, Kopley contends that "the source for a key portion of Poe's plot . . . is *The Death-Bed Confessions of the Late Countess of Guernsey, to Lady Anne H****** [1822]," which conspicuously parallels the tale "in language, character, and plot" (67). Indeed, *The Death-Bed Confessions* even includes a literal reference to "the theft of 'the purloined letter'" (my emphasis) (qtd. 67).

Like the links Kopley reveals between Poe's two other Dupin tales and the newspaper stories he has discovered, the parallels he finds between "The Purloined Letter" and the Queen Caroline affair (along with its death-bed addendum) are mostly convincing and entirely original. Yet Kopley also recognizes that his scholarly sleuthing--no matter how often it rests on probable as opposed to strictly verifiable evidence (hence his frequent use of qualifiers like "perhaps," "may have," and so on, regarding Poe's sources)--requires a further turn of the hermeneutic screw. Accordingly, Kopley's last chapter (excluding his concise "Conclusion") revisits his earlier observation—made under the heading of "formalism"—that Poe secreted his signature "Eddy" in the three tales. This cryptic autograph licenses Kopley's third critical procedure, a "biographical" reading of the tales (77) laid out in quasi-psychoanalytic fashion.

Kopley doesn't perform anything like the reductive oedipal fandangos to be found in, let us say, Marie Bonaparte's vulgar Freudian interpretations of Poe's tales (including the ones under consideration). But he nonetheless constructs a psychological *mise en scène* in which Poe acts the oedipal son simultaneously figuring an ersatz antebellum Southern gentleman. Growing up, he reminds us, Poe had heard rumors, probably from his stepfather, that his younger sister Rosalie had been born out of wedlock. In other words, Poe's mother supposedly had had an illicit relationship after she was left by Poe's father,

David Poe. As if deciphering one of those words that seem undetectable when stretched across a chart, the Dupin-like Kopley detects in all three Dupin tales Poe's effort to redeem the honor of his mother. All three tales, he writes, "have one critical element in common: a woman's uncertain reputation." Put another way, "it may well be that Poe created Dupin--who solves mysteries and assigns guilt--in order, by analogy, to solve the ultimate mystery of Rosalie's birth and to face his own guilt" for "not defending" his mother (78, 79, 80).

What, then, might motivate our own critical desire to solve the mystery of Poe's three mysteries? Kopley argues that the astute reader can discern and read these tales in accord with Poe's deliberate (read: self-aware) intention, above all both by tracing (and re-reading) *their* sources and plumbing his covertly confessed motives in composing them:

Poe consistently wrote for two audiences, the many and the few, and his Dupin tales illustrate his usual doubleness of purpose. For the many, he offered an intriguing mystery and the brilliant hero who could solve it For the few, he offered formal complexity, creative transformation [of sources] and autobiographical revelation. But surely Poe's private satisfaction was considerable. And our satisfaction--in Poe's artistry and in our learning from his detective to read Poe--is great, as well. (87)

This passage exemplifies the way Kopley's manifest "identification with Poe" (3) permeates the book, yet it strikes me as a tad questionable, or at least incautious. If, as even Dupin's name suggests, Poe sets out to dupe "the many" in these tales (even if only for their pleasure), why may he not also be setting traps—such as his cryptographic signature--equally to dupe "the few," for reasons permanently hidden from us and perhaps from him too? Might not the Dupin tales enclose what he termed in one of his earliest tales "some never-to-be-imparted-secret" ("MS. Found in a Bottle")? At the very least, Poe might just as well have assumed that he could read us readers, simple *or* sophisticated, reading his tales, but that we could not exhaustively read *him*. After all, in his first mystery tale, Dupin notes how the game of chess only *seems* more analytically complex than the apparently simpler game of "draughts" or checkers. In the latter

game, however,

Deprived of ordinary resources, the analyst throws himself into the spirit of his opponent, identifies himself therewith, and not unfrequently sees thus, at a glance, the sole methods (sometimes indeed absurdly simple ones) by which he may seduce into error or hurry into miscalculation. (143)

Is there a lesson for all of Poe's critics here? As I have stated, Richard Kopley's new book unquestionably makes an important contribution to Poe studies. I wonder, though, if the imp of "miscalculation" doesn't sometimes contaminate the air of plausibility that otherwise inspires Kopley's many sound insights into the Poe mystery genre. If so, the mystery would remain "Poe" himself.

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