So Very Self Evident: Adultery and Abortion in “The Purloined Letter”

“The cushions we probed with the fine long needles you have seen me employ.”

Edgar Allan Poe, “The Purloined Letter,” 1845

In 1846, the sixteenth edition of William A. Alcott's *The Young Man's Guide* hit the American streets, maintaining its cautionary message that the world was an awfully smutty place, “abound[ing] in impure publications [and] licentious paintings and engravings, which circulate in various ways.”¹ According to Alcott, not only was it crucial for a young man's moral development to avoid such objects, but it was also necessary for him to know their subtle traps: the obscene picture “under cover of a watch case,” the seemingly innocuous book steeped in double entendres (334). To make sure that his readership understood what he meant by “double entendres,” Alcott included both a phonetic key to it—“pronounced *entaunders*”—and a definition:

By this is meant *decent speeches, with double meanings*. I mention these because they prevail, in some parts of the country, to a most alarming degree. . . . Now no serious observer of human life and conduct can doubt that by every species of impure language, whether in the form of hints, innuendos, double entendres, or plainer speech, impure thoughts are awakened, a licentious imagination inflamed, and licentious purposes formed, which would otherwise never have existed. (311)

For Alcott, as for many of his concerned medical and moral contemporaries, the lure of these vices (“not only social but also solitary”) dangerously illuminated the highway to disease and premature death” (314). Such pronouncements formed, of course, an increasingly common refrain of nineteenth-century sexual advice literature directed at both men.

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and women; to take up Michel Foucault’s paradigmatic formulation, they were part of the social mechanisms that turned sex into “the secret” in an “endlessly proliferating economy” of biopolitical discourses and regulations. But what is so interesting about Alcott’s account here lies less with its anxieties about human erotic activity than it does with Alcott’s sense of having to wage an almost losing battle against a kind of print culture that promoted, in increasingly cunning and indefatigable ways, the very activity he sought to restrict. If, as historian Ronald Walters shows, we can trace an intensification of concern with the sexual behavior of the young American population to the proliferation of advice literature in the 1830s and 40s, then we must also see this concern as a motivated response, at least in part, to the creative flair of a certain kind of text passing itself off as something very different from its surface appearance—as something that slips across a guarded threshold, narrowly eluding the vigilant eyes of America’s reputable establishment, rather like a purloined letter, the secret contents of which threaten to bring down the entire house.

This is how the 19th-century market in reproductive control and sexual education operated. Although Alcott does not directly mention it, perhaps for fear of appearing lewd, the publishers of pamphlets, advertisements, and tracts publicly disseminating racy information drew upon a vibrant realm of double entendres and euphemisms, particularly in the wake of state laws passed against the sale of contraceptives and the practice of abortion in the two decades before the Civil War.

According to Janet Farrell Brodie in her extraordinary Contraception and Abortion in Nineteenth-Century America, antebellum Americans quickly learned that [domestic manuals] and “private medical guides for ladies” carried contraceptive advice and ways of incurring miscarriage, and that condoms and douching syringes could be purchased where “voluntary-motherhood” products were sold. Throughout the 1840s, gynecological surgeons couched surgical abortions in terms of

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Comment [U3]: Really good!
RESPONSE: THANKS

Comment [U4]: Au: Your citation is for pages 138-160. I could only find the “domestic manuals” quote. Could you specify where the other quotes are?
RESPONSE: I ADDED ANOTHER SOURCE AND EXPLANATION IN THE FOOTNOTE.
“unblocking” uterine obstructions; regular physicians sometimes added tiny postscripts to advertisements noting that their wives served female patients for “ailments” related to “suppressed” or arrested menstruation. And like many of their colleagues in the medical profession, popular lecturers on health and physiology imparted details about reproduction in, as Brodie puts it, a “far from unique . . . mix of information and innuendo” (109). Moreover, printed warnings about such insidious materials, by critics like Alcott, for instance, inadvertently effected a broader awareness of the availability of birth-control information and erotic materials; in the process of denouncing fornication or abortion, they often disseminated crucial information about it. In some cases, the denouncement itself was just a cover for an announcement, a kind of deft double entendre governing the appearance of outrage. For example, the July 21, 1839, edition of New York’s Sunday Morning News carried an article proclaiming that the famous abortionist Mrs. Restelle “persevered in her nefarious traffic” of pills for “married women who had been indiscreet.” Following a statement about New York City’s “wise statute” against abortion, as well as a warning that Mrs. Restelle euphemistically called herself a “midwife and professor of diseases of women,” the author of the article astonishingly reproduces Mrs. Restelle’s ad in its entirety: “Mme Restelle’s Sure Remedies—Price $5 and $10; can only be procured at her office, No 1 East 52nd Street.” Within this mixture of admonition and exposition, the extent to which the article actually opposed the distribution of Mrs. Restelle’s product is sufficiently obscured.

Such diverse and circuitous routes around genteel morality and state laws did not proceed entirely unnoticed, however, and several states went so far as to draft legislation against the use of any ambiguous language in reports, pamphlets and advertisements concerning ailments particular to women. Yet, throughout the 19th century, the laws against it notwithstanding, ambiguous,
euphemistic wording continued to frame the sale of products and procedures: the “Female Regulator,” the “Woman's Friend,” the “Samaritan's Gift for Females.” In the words of one New York gynecologist, “every schoolgirl knows the meaning of these terms.”

According to Helen Lekfowitz Horowitz, many purveyors of abortion and contraception also figured out how to blur “the boundary between commerce in contraceptives and works of physiology... Given the way that many works of physiology were advertised, it seemed possible that some authors were using the cover of science to print racy material” (284). In fact, in a fairly early American printing of *Aristotle’s Masterpiece* (1817), the publisher seems to have attempted to head off exactly this accusation, avowing in the preface that the book was not intended to “stir up bestial appetites” of “unclean” readers but that it was made for women whose “modesty” precluded them from asking for help “in matters of the womb.”

In the medical schools themselves, the number of publications on the anatomy of female fertility—particularly the mysteries of ovulation and menstruation—also grew at an extraordinary rate. As historian of gynecology, James Ricci, puts it: “The gynaecological literature of the first half of the nineteenth century is immense; of the latter half, gigantic.” By mid-century, American gynecologists were divided in their support of abortion, and those who opposed it began actively seeking the support of church and state. With the promotion of the theory that life began at conception, abortion became linked to the “characteristic privilege of sovereign power... the right to decide life and death” (to quote Foucault on the state's surveillance of sex). And as an increasing number of gynecologists began to equate it with infanticide, abortion came under a new slate of statutory regulations. Abortion also became tied to fears of adultery and promiscuity, to a prevailing belief that the procedure literally erased evidence of sexual misconduct and therefore licensed it. For one mid-century gynecologist, anxious about the direction of American
civilization, it seemed that “the old-fashioned womb [would] cease to exist, except in history.”

It is within this remarkably public world of advertisements, books, newspaper articles, and laws on the subject of reproductive control that I wish to place “The Purloined Letter.” Published in 1845, at the high point of what Walters calls the “public discourse about sex and related matters” in Victorian-nineteenth-century America, Poe's tale engages with the controversies these discourses generated and revealed, and it does so by means of the very same indirection and innuendo that suffuse many of them. As a result, it illuminates, even as it attempts to screen, the secrets contained within the purloined letter, pushing us to ask what exactly is so pressing about the “affair” of a letter stolen from a woman's “boudoir”:

‘Perhaps it is the very simplicity of the thing which puts you at fault,’ said [Dupin].

‘What nonsense you do talk!’ replied the Prefect, laughing heartily.

‘Perhaps the mystery is a little too plain,’ said Dupin.

‘Oh, good heavens! who ever heard of such an idea?’

‘A little too self-evident.’

‘Ha! ha! ha! – ha! ha! ha! – ho! ho! ho!’ –roared our visiter, profoundly amused. (331)

If we're the kind of readers who are in the know, those familiar with the trials of famous abortionists printed (such as Madame Restelle) printed throughout the New England papers in the 1840s, with the trade in erotic materials (as well as with the arrests of the tradesmen), and with the contraception ads that seemed to have been slipped into every possible magazine, then we can begin to hear the subject of reproductive control being spoken in “The Purloined Letter.” As Jacques Lacan notes about Poe's tale, the “dialogue may be more fertile than it seems.” It is only by inferring the matter and magnitude of the letter's contents, moreover, that we can then fathom both the depth of the urgency it repeatedly communicates and the questions the letter raises about
In this essay, I argue that Poe's “The Purloined Letter” is immersed in the kind of double entendres that Alcott discerns in every corner of his mid-nineteenth-century world—from euphemistic advertisements for abortions to slyly erotic medical guidebooks—and that the tale's “decent speeches with double meanings” underscore its exploration of the decoys surrounding sex in 1840s America. Through its layers of innuendo and its metaphors, “The Purloined Letter” also explores the theme of passing (as white, as faithful, as legitimate, as something other than what you are), binding the notion of a counterfeit self or appearance to cultural tensions about the sexual freedom of white women. It is this particular anxiety about women, captured in the maneuvers of Poe's “exalted royal personage,” that the tale's most famous critics, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Barbara Johnson, at once detect and overlook in their discussions of its hidden and surface narratives. Contrary to their shared conviction that the contents of the letter are never revealed, that the letter's significance does not lie with this revelation but with the actions its absence precipitates, I will demonstrate that the contents of the letter are almost entirely divulged and necessarily so; we just have to identify the context within which the tale's innuendo resonates.

Like the light-fingered and “lynx-eye[d]” Minister, who assembles a series of interconnected hints, manages to decipher the overturned letter and thus “fathom[s] [the woman’s] secret,” Poe's reader can follow the same trail toward the peculiar and perilous nature of an open secret. A key hint arises in the tale's attention to the cleverness of the characters who can decode what another character's body tries to disguise or suppress. Thus, although the Minister cannot read an “unexposed” letter, he discerns its significance by tracing its appearance on the table first to the “confusion of the personage” and then to her sudden composure in relation to the “personage who stood at her elbow” (332–333). Dupin adopts the same strategy, reading the
Minister’s body language—his “yawning, lounging, and dawdling” as an elaborate performance designed to mask an intensity of energy—at the same time that Dupin himself conceals the movement of his own eyes behind dark glasses (346). Because the woman in the tale, who also uses the strategy, does not overtly react when the Minister steals her letter, she quickly obscures her despair, splitting her bodily appearance from what she hides beneath its surface or within it. To the man at her elbow, nothing changes. He sees her for what she is: completely visible and above suspicion, like the letter on the table. He does not presume any contradictory meaning to her composure, nor the fact that something on display might also be out of sight.

In such ways, Poe’s narrative immediately connects the physical existence of the woman with the letter, placing their shared and material manifestations into a framework of congruency. In fact, the kinetic shift through which the Minister “perceives the paper” and then “fathoms her secret” effectively merges the woman with the letter, as the one entity encloses the secret of the other. The word “fathom” is telling too, because its etymological affinity with nautical exploration suggests the sense of literally plumbing something deep and dark. What I want to stress in this discussion, or to return to the surface of the tale, is the contextual legibility not only of the letter but also of the woman’s body. She may never directly appear to the narrator, may never come forward for a complete description, but she sets all of the events in motion; she contacts the police, devises a reward, and describes the letter to the Prefect, whose own detailed description of it to Dupin and the narrator is not duplicated, only recounted. This sly, second-hand representation on the part of Poe’s narrator once again aligns the woman’s body with her letter, generating the idea that what she wants back is precisely that alignment, that ability to decide how to represent—and perhaps whether to deliver—something in her keeping. As she works behind the scenes to regain this control, Poe indicates that the potential danger to her body is very real, for
his narrator opens “The Purloined Letter” with reference to “the affair of the Rue Morgue, and the mystery attending the murder of Marie Rogêt,” and therefore casts “The Purloined Letter” as part of a trilogy in which the women compelling the other two investigations are mutilated cadavers. Their wretched fate frames her story and she seems to know it.

The tale abruptly shifts from the narrator’s recollection of the murdered women to the intrusion into his study of the Prefect, an action he casts as a coincidence in light of his present musings.

To any casual observer, [Dupin and the narrator] might have seemed intently and exclusively occupied with the curling eddies of smoke that oppressed the atmosphere of the chamber. For myself, however, I was mentally discussing certain topics which had formed matter for conversation between us at an earlier period of the evening; I mean the affair of the Rue Morgue, and the mystery attending the murder of Marie Rogêt. I looked upon it, therefore, as something of a coincidence, when the door of our apartment was thrown open and admitted our old acquaintance, Monsieur G—, the Prefect of the Parisian police. (330)

This is a significant narrative move because it indicates another behind-the-scenes design: a prompting to bear in mind that the narrator is not omniscient but present in the tale, making decisions about what to include and suppress, about what to cast as coincidental or interconnected. As an ally and admirer of Dupin, who is himself a “partisan of the lady concerned,” the narrator finds himself treading carefully around the particulars of the purloined letter (348). Too much is at stake. But he is also a story-teller, and his impulse is to urge his reader through artful suggestions and juxtapositions toward the secrets opening up around him. His hinting is rich, and things are laid out with a seeming innocence and frankness—and the double entendres and sexual...
innuendo cover their own tracks. Thus, if he had to, he could protest that his inclusion of the description of the musket that shoots blanks is just a description of an empty musket and not an allusion to anyone’s penis (347–348); that the reference to an “unusual gaping in the joints” or to a “secret drawer” simply describes furniture and not a woman’s pelvis (335, 336); that Paris is Paris and America, America.

No discussion of Poe's tale can begin proceed without taking into account the fact that Poe's cagey language compelled extended deliberations from, as Barbara Johnson puts it, “two eminent French thinkers whose readings emit their own . . . call-to-analysis.” For it seems that the debate between Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida over “The Purloined Letter,” coupled with Johnson's own dazzling intervention into it, has come to frame Poe's text with a definitive, if not final, word on it. Getting past this circumference in order to offer anything new necessitates, I think, keeping in clear view the levels of complexity and the textual detail that each of these thinkers brings to bear upon and unearths from “The Purloined Letter.” We cannot, in other words, simply acknowledge the Lacan-Derrida-Johnson context for reading “The Purloined Letter” and then set it aside. Again in Johnson's words: “The urgency of these undertakings [Derrida's, Lacan’s] cannot . . . be overestimated, since the logic of metaphysics, of politics, of belief, and of knowledge itself is based on the imposition of definable objective frontiers and outlines whose possibility and/or justifiability are here [in “The Purloined Letter”] being put into question” (231). Between them, Lacan and Derrida entirely overturn the impression that “much is made of nothing” in Poe's tale, as an early reviewer described it in 1845. And, following them, Johnson elucidates the link Poe forges between language and power, clarifying what it means for subjectivity to be formed within a structure and “by a letter” (248).

Because all three analyses take up questions surrounding being, legitimacy, and femininity,
all three inadvertently point to the same issues surrounding abortion in the 1840s, issues that become legible in “The Purloined Letter” once a historical frame of reference is set around it.

When this frame is set, the lines of inquiry in Lacan and Derrida through Poe's text to questions concerning why “the law holds the woman in position as a signifier,” as Lacan puts it, can then be directed to concerns that reproductive control liberated women in unpredictable social and symbolic ways.18 To clarify: if Lacan sees at work in “The Purloined Letter” the law of language as it forces the subject into a system of sexual difference, a law he understands as a paternal claim to and redirection of maternal production and identification, then the question of the subject’s origin within the maternal body becomes another level of that claim. The phallus (understood as patriarchal discourse and injunction) shores up the immense anxiety of non-existence and of existence’s contingency upon the mother’s prerogative, bringing the physiological origin of an embryo in line with the symbolic origin of an embryonic subject. The vulnerability of the entire system rests on the possibility that the mother can violate the law and suspend this teleological narrative of subjectivity; if careful and quiet, only she knows if a fetus truly exists, and what its name really might be—bastard or heir—regardless of paternal entitlement. The criminalization of abortion in Poe’s time developed out of that existential vulnerability and through a medical-philosophical narrative that pulled the fetus into view and obscured the woman attached to it. Thus, it is at precisely the places where Lacan and Derrida work out such concepts as sign and origin in Poe’s tale, that the allusive themes of pregnancy and termination also unfold, and “The Purloined Letter” aligns the question of a woman's reproductive choice with the broader questions of framing and truth, contingencies and contracts.19 The medical archives of nineteenth-century gynecology permit us to recognize what Poe's innuendo intimates on a very specific level: “a personage of most exalted station—the exalted royal personage” is pregnant by a man other than
her husband, “the other exalted personage,” and she possesses the option of abortion, a procedure by which she can erase the only material evidence, apart from the letter, of her affair (332).

NOTES

1. 330. Alcott’s italics


3. See Walters’ Introduction to Primers for Prudery: Sexual Advice To Victorian Americans, in which he analyses the market for the literature in terms of a complex “web of personal and social considerations” (15).

4. In the 1830s and 1840s, every major New England newspaper carried advertisements for abortion drugs, condoms, and surgical abortion procedures; in some cities, advertisements for these products and procedures were also left in hotel lobbies and in railroad depots. In response to the emerging legislation, the number of ads remained high, but their wording became increasingly veiled. See also Horowitz, Rereading Sex, 70–122.

5. See Janet Farrell Brodie’s chapter titled “The Antebellum Public Audience,” 136–180. See also Nancy Theriot’s Mothers and Daughters in Nineteenth-Century America, in which she demonstrates that the term “voluntary motherhood” was in circulation well before the late nineteenth-century feminist movement of the same name came into being (Theriot, 41–42).

6. For example, the January 7, 1843 issue of The New York Lancet, which carried an advertisement by a Mr. J.H. Ross, “Cupper and Leecher,” who publicized in barely readable text that “Mrs. R. applies Leeches to the Os Uteri”—one way to cure the problem of a woman’s so-called arrested monthly bleeding.

8. Quoted in Brodie, *Contraception and Abortion*, 225. See also her chapter titled “Criminalizing Reproductive Control” for the progression of state laws against contraception and abortion in the second half of the 19th century.


10. *One Hundred Years*, vii.

11. Foucault, 147. See the last chapter of *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I*, in which Foucault analyzes how definitions of sex and life came under state power. The “thorough medicalization of women’s bodies,” Foucault asserts, was carried out “in the name of the responsibility [women] owed to the health of their children, the solidity of the family institution, and the safeguarding of society” (146). See also Brodie on the new and the rise of restrictive legislation of the mid century to the 1880s in her chapter “Criminalizing Reproductive Control,” which opens with her argument that the second half of the nineteenth century saw a new effort to “restore American ‘social purity’” through the restriction of sexuality and the “control of reproduction” (254).

12. Quoted in Ricci, *One Hundred Years*, 37.


15. Edgar Allan Poe. “The Purloined Letter.” *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings.* (London: Penguin, 1986), 332. All quotations from the tale are from this text. All italics are Poe’s.


19. If anything breaks the contract binding women to a notion of instinctive motherhood, it's abortion. According to Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz's findings, any news in the 1840s that a married woman had paid a visit to Madame Restell threatened the foundations of “male control” (206).