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“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 way “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 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 nineteenth-century market in reproductive control
and sexual education operated. Although Alcott does not directly men-
tion 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 “[d]omestic manuals” and “private medical guides for
ladies” carried contraceptive advice and ways of incurring miscar-
riage 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
“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 reproduc-
tion 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. Restell “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. Restell euphemistically called herself a “midwife and professor of diseases of women,” the author of the article astonishingly reproduces Mrs. Restell’s ad in its entirety: “Mme Restell’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. Restell’s product is sufficiently obscured.7

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.”8 According to Helen Lekfkowitz 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.”9

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 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 (such as Madame Restell) 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.”¹⁴ 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 adultery and abortion in mid-nineteenth-century America.

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.¹⁵

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). If two can play at that game, then so
can three. 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 (330). 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.

[T]o 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 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 1845.17 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” 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 eraze the only material evidence, apart from the letter, of her affair (332).

Given the presence of arguments in 1840s America that abortion and adultery went hand in hand—that reproductive control could license women to cuckold men—it is significant that Lacan calls the woman in Poe’s tale the guardian of legitimacy and notes that “we are assured of but one thing: the Queen cannot bring [the letter] to the knowledge of her lord and master” (42). In fact, it’s as though Lacan assumes “The Purloined Letter” is about an affair, that it is of course a love letter connected in some way to betrayal and to “the ceremony of returning letters [at] the extinction of the fires of love’s feasts” activating the plot (40). For Lacan, that people in high places commit adultery is a matter not really worth discussing; the exalted rank of the protagonists in “The Purloined Letter” simply saves their escapades “from vaudeville” (33). Yet, the more pressing issue in his analysis involves the way in which the tale functions as an allegory of psychoanalysis and the letter a signifier that possesses its subjects. As a result, he at once raises and evades the very questions he poses about legitimacy and about the role that a woman (or “woman”) plays as its “guardian” within a structure of paternal inheritance and naming. What, for instance, is indicated about this structure if the words of a woman function as the only confirmation of both the presence of a fetus and the identity of its father? Lacan traces instead the path by which the letter, associated as it is with absence and femininity, arrives at the place of sexual difference. In a way, my argument follows his route, back to the female body and to a scene of symbolic castration in which the phallus is cut off from the certainty of paternity.20

According to Lacan, even if Dupin were to rip up the letter, we would still have a kind of metaphysical language, still be subjected to it; Dupin’s guarantee of the letter’s return to its protector demonstrates the fulfillment of his duty to communicate the sign’s conflict with being: its split nature in relation to, as Derrida puts it, the symbolic absence “between the legs of woman,” “the place of castration.”21 But the woman is more than the letter’s guardian or protector; she is also its source, and the condition of its theft points to an identifiable relocation and not necessarily to a timeless law. For Derrida, Lacan’s interpretation not only establishes the phallus as a privileged signifier “depend[ing] neither on the signified, nor on the subject,” but also erects a kind of “authentic life” for it, one that somehow persists in a realm beyond its material contingencies (423). “Materiality,” says Derrida, “the
sensory and repetitive side of the recording, the paper letter, drawings in ink, can be divided or multiplied, destroyed or set adrift. . . . If by some misfortune the phallus were divisible or reduced to the status of a part object, the entire edifice would collapse, and this must be [he adds with irony] avoided at all costs” (472–73, 478–79). The system of the symbolic, as Lacan thus formulates it, keeps the phallus in its proper place as, Derrida says, a “symbol only of an absence” and in the custody of (though not represented by) the woman (424). Derrida argues that, as a consequence, Lacan invests his interpretation in the “truth” of castration and in a theory of the signifier’s “destiny as destination” (436). “What is called man and what is called woman might be subject to [phallogocentrism],” Derrida concedes, but “[a]ll of phallogocentrism is articulated on the basis of a determined situation, . . . An (individual, perceptual, local, cultural, historical, etc.) situation on the basis of which what is called a ‘sexual theory’ is elaborated . . .” (480–481).

From Derrida’s perspective, the woman in “The Purloined Letter” is a figure who both sustains and threatens the system which contains her; everything about her leaks its divisions. The power of her letter resides in the writing itself, not in some original essence, for as Poe’s tale indicates, the contracts, cast as both fiat and blackmail, bind one figure to another within a structure of fiction and narration. Poe’s narrator is deeply invested in writing, Derrida reminds us, and how it transmits history and inheritance through a network of narrated frames. In this network, and in the absence of any other proof, one could add that a child is the King’s if the Queen says it is. Derrida’s insistence upon the importance of the *parergon*, or the narrative frames, in fact creates an analogy with the woman’s corporeal existence: like the story’s enclosure within other stories, which gets repeatedly overlooked, her pregnant body becomes rendered as similarly supplemental, derivative, and ornamental material in relation to the paternal narrative of birthright that is generated through it. Yet, like Lacan, Derrida does not elaborate upon this analogy, nor upon the pun repeatedly produced around the issue of the woman “delivering” the letter. Though similarly rich in double entendres that open up the structure of sexual difference to the problem of its reproduction, Derrida’s essay stops short of exploring how the threat of femininity, as Poe’s tale indicates, is located between her words and her body—a body that threatens to split not in half but into two (438).

In her essay on the dizzying triptych of Poe, Lacan, and Derrida, Barbara Johnson draws attention to the rivalry between Dupin and
the Minister within “The Purloined Letter” and to the rivalry between Derrida and Lacan over it. Pointing out where their theories tend to overlap and illuminate each other, Johnson notes Derrida’s failure to acknowledge his debt to Lacan’s Écrits and Lacan’s refusal to credit Derrida’s grammatology. In her own reading of Poe’s tale, she folds their points together in order to address a third rivalry: that of Atreus and Thyestes, the story Dupin refers to in the letter he leaves for the Minister in place of the stolen one. Thus, enclosed within “The Purloined Letter” is an allusion to a tale involving adultery, infanticide, and debts recovered by ruthless violence. In fact, the Atreus-Thyestes reference functions as much more than a literary allusion and becomes a powerful echo, sounding a message down through Poe’s tale and into the letters (Dupin’s, the woman’s) themselves. In Johnson’s words, the “story is framed by its own content” (236). Moreover, in the version of the myth to which Dupin refers, it’s a purloined letter that informs King Atreus of his wife’s betrayal with his brother Thyestes; the Queen’s own handwriting names Thyestes, not Atreus, as the father of her child. Brilliantly taking all of these debts and rivalries together, Johnson asserts that “the questions [raised by these texts] are legion: What is a man? Who is the child’s father? What is the relation between incest, murder, and the death of a child? What is a king? How can we read the letter of our destiny? What is seeing?” (236).

Although Johnson does not track these questions back into “The Purloined Letter,” preferring to leave them as latent implications about the contingent nature of power, the tale itself follows them through to prospective answers. It binds the mythological account of adultery to the events at hand and artfully implies that, like Atreus’s wife, this “exalted personage” is also pregnant. And although Johnson contends that the “letter’s message is never revealed” (113), we are permitted to read all of the other words in “The Purloined Letter” and to consider what we select for detection—to go wide instead of deep. Without disputing the far-reaching, philosophical ideas that Johnson uncovers in or addresses through the tale, I remain unsure about her point that Poe offers “no possibility of a position of analytic mastery” (214). For, as a potential victim of the fierce retribution steadily referenced across the tale, the woman must assume this position and influence the interpretative direction of her letter. It is she who must master the events in an attempt to secure the letter’s return to her, and her perspective exists in relation to the narrator’s dispersed and repeated references to death and mutilation. She not only faces the prospect of being killed but of being killed in the kind of frenzy of violence that engulfs the
women in the Rue Morgue and Marie Rogêt, as well as the cadavers served up for dinner in the myth of Atreus and Thyestes. Ostensibly describing a “game of puzzles,” Dupin’s words here hint at the text’s method of disclosing how the woman’s hidden letter reflects her “excessively obvious” embodied perspective:

‘A novice in the game generally seeks to embarrass his opponents by giving them the most minutely lettered names; but the adept selects such words as stretch, in large characters, from one end of the chart to the other. These, like the over-largely lettered signs and placards in the street, escape observation by dint of being excessively obvious; and here the physical oversight is precisely analogous with the moral inapprehension by which the intellect suffers to pass unnoticed those considerations which are too obtrusively and too palpably self-evident.’ (345)

The letter’s content may not be directly presented to us but its message is disseminated throughout (or “stretched” across) the tale and beyond it, in the Atreus-Thyestes myth and in the texts circulating in Poe’s 19th-century America. These signifiers indicate a signified and even a referent: a fetus, one that the “exalted royal personage” may or may not bring to term.

We are told at the outset, for example, that the woman’s urgent concern rests on ‘the non-appearance of certain results’—evasive wording that slyly imparts how the suspicion of pregnancy begins with the nonappearance of a certain monthly event (332). The Prefect later divulges that “[t]he personage robbed is more thoroughly convinced, every day, of the necessity of reclaiming her letter” (333). And again later: “[t]he fact is, it is becoming of more and more importance every day; and the reward has been lately doubled” (337). The passage of time, a pivotal element in the woman’s distress, becomes bound up with the growing size of the reward, and because the latter does not remain fixed as the former progresses, this implication follows: that as the days and months pass, the reward is not the only thing growing in size. Mirroring or duplicating (in financial terms) another expanding entity in the woman’s keeping, the reward has both a metaphorical and literal purpose in the text. This purpose becomes especially legible when it is considered in relation to the words “conceal” and “concealment,” which occur no fewer than seven times in the tale and which resonate with a lengthy (at least two-centuries) legal and public perception of hidden, clandestine pregnancies and suspicious
infant deaths. Poe’s nineteenth-century audience would have known that the word “concealment,” accompanied by any hint of a missing newborn, denoted a very serious crime. In Dupin’s words, “in all cases of concealment, a disposal of the article concealed—a disposal of it in this recherché manner—is in the very first instance, presumable and presumed” (341).

If a child is in fact born in the eighteen-month time frame of the tale, then he or she bears only the appearance of legitimacy and presents a surface behind which something else is hidden, a surface the letter threatens to break, a lineage it can set off course. “‘Well, I may venture so far as to say,’ the Prefect hints, ‘that the paper gives its holder a certain power in a certain quarter where such power is immensely valuable’” (332). The implicit question as to why lineage is traced through paternity thus also resonates throughout the tale, for paternal naming and inheritance involve the sovereignty of the conceptual over the material and a severing of the link to the mother’s body. In the tale’s “economy of justice,” to borrow Johnson’s terminology—“The Purloined Letter” is after all a “crime story,” she emphatically reminds us (214)—the redirection (or theft) of legitimacy from a maternal connection to a paternal claim underscores all of the male rivalries over the letter. The purloining of what belongs to a woman, moreover, takes place in front of her eyes: “Its rightful owner saw, but, of course, dared not call attention to the act, in the presence of the third personage who stood at her elbow” (Poe 333). That is, she comprehends the system of which she is a part, she perfectly sees how it works, and she maneuvers for latitude within it. As John Muller and William Richardson suggest in their interpretation of Lacan’s essay on the tale, “The position of woman as signifier recalls Lévi-Strauss’s thesis . . . : that the origin of language and culture involved establishing pacts by means of the exchange of women between groups (for whom the women then symbolized the pacts).”23 A suggestive pun quickly emerges in the word “letter”: if we consider that a woman’s body lets blood monthly, makes her a blood letter, then this letter’s circulation within a male system founds her value upon a process of exchange. The patrilineal direction of kinship, in other words, equates the meaning of the female body with a sealed envelope, one that contains a contract formulated in relation to a restricted economy. As Derrida muses, what if the letter were the property of no one, if its writing were set “adrift,” “graft[ed] onto other writings” (484)? Or, in the words of one of the 1840s’ most popular physicians and lecturers on sex and reproduction, Frederick Hollick, “No matter how obtained,
by purchase, force, or strategem, a woman, as a wife, has always been considered . . . as a mere possession, like an animal. [The idea] crops up in many of our laws, customs, and ways of thinking and speaking. The term, 'my wife,' is still used by many with the same intent and meaning as my dog, or my horse.”

In “The Purloined Letter,” we are told that the Minister who takes the letter fixes a “large black” seal on it, a seal bearing the D— cipher or the Minister’s initial. The seal, originally “small and red, with the ducal arms of the S— family,” is obscured and the woman’s “diminutive and feminine” handwriting is marked over in a “bold and decided” way (346). These seals determine the worth and authenticity of the letter and its contents, a letter that, now protruding from a cheap card-rack, gives the appearance of “worthlessness” (347). By virtue of the tale’s metaphorical dexterity, the image of the letter’s placement (the careless thrusting of it, no less) among “five or six visiting cards” insinuates the idea of promiscuity and illuminates the idea that the Minister can take the same entity (the woman, her letter, her fetus) and cast it within an entirely different frame (346). He possesses the story that can turn something pure into something prostituted. Suspended in this narrative, the woman risks the loss of her whiteness; the “soiled and torn condition of the letter” reflects back upon her and her offspring. Should the letter’s contents be revealed, the possible child would be written off as worthless and illegitimate, a dead-end in the line of descent. He or she may look like the real thing, but would fall into the same category as a “trumpery fillagree card-rack of pasteboard,” hanging from an umbilical-like “dirty blue ribbon.” (346).

The play of color, of black against blue and red, furthermore, draws definitions of race and blood quantum into the crisis. Given that antebellum white women, especially the “exalted” or blueblood ones, were invested with the safekeeping of blood purity against any kind of amalgamation, it is possible that the tale’s resolutely unnamed matter of blackmail generates the homophonic double of “black male” and thus adds another level of possible transgression to the secrets of the letter. Although any kind of promiscuity threatened to sidetrack a line of descent from its so-called uncorrupted origin, it was the potential for contamination of white by black that lent the threat such urgency. As Joan Dayan writes in “Poe, Persons, and Property”:

Poe moves us back to a time when a myth of blood conferred an unpolluted, legitimate pedigree (”The Fall of the House of Usher” or
“William Wilson,” both 1839) and forward to an analytics of blood that ushered in a complex of color: the ineradicable stain, the drop that could not be seen but must be feared (“Ligeia,” “The Masque of the Red Death,” or The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pryn [1838]). . . . An innate quality (the unseen blood stain) could result in the conversion of a person into property. . . .

The transformation through blood did not work the other way around, of course, for a white man’s seal on a black woman’s body conferred nothing in antebellum America, and descent remained traced through her.

Like the tales mentioned by Dayan, “The Purloined Letter” captures, in similarly allusive language, the possibility of an imperceptible stain upon a family of a “most exalted station” (Poe 332). And, at the same time that it explores the ways in which adultery in the 1840s was not just a matter of infidelity but a crime against the blood, an opening up of blood-lines to uncontrolled circulation, it gestures toward the accompanying development of proto-eugenic gynecological treatises on racial degeneration through bad breeding. As physician Thomas Burgeland rhetorically asks in his 1837 study Physiological Observations, “would [the abolitionist] feel any objection for his daughter to enter into a matrimonial connexion with one of those beings whose cause he so impetuously advocated?” (35). Or as Hester Pendleton exclaims in a similar vein, a woman must choose her mate wisely; it is not by chance that “one child is born a fool, another a prodigy.” In an oblique reference to Madame Restell, the “infamous lady physician,” Pendleton warns her readers to avoid the services she advertises “in the daily papers;” a woman should not do what she wants and then allow herself to “be probed with a whalebone.” All of these kinds of perils crowd upon and into the purloined letter, a document that is, as we are told, “much soiled and crumpled” as it passes from the woman’s boudoir to the Minister’s apartment (Poe 346).

In such a degraded condition, the letter’s description yields a subtle pattern of double entendres, especially when it is combined with that of the Minister’s apartment. Noting these echoes, Derrida raises the possibility that “the purloined letter, like an immense female body, stretch[es] out across the Minister’s office when Dupin enters,” adding that Dupin ultimately locates it “between the ‘legs’ of the fireplace” (440). In the context of nineteenth-century gynecology, the letter’s position on the fireplace becomes a tongue-in-cheek reference to popular theories of a wayward woman’s over-heated womb, the
furor uterinus, resulting from thwarted and illicit love. Moreover, if we can read the woman’s body as metaphorically “stretched across” the room, then the very medical-like instruments used to probe it should not be tossed aside as irrelevant information, even if they’re considered ineffective procedure on the tale’s literal level of narration. Because these instruments tend only to be noted in the tale’s scholarship as evidence of the police’s failed detective work, the woman’s body once more recedes to the background and the obvious “protrusion” of her letter fails to designate what is happening with her belly. Putting this stretched and splayed body back in the picture brings into focus the subject of nineteenth-century reproductive control, spotlighting in particular the trademark utensils of gynecology’s abortion procedures: the uterine sound and curette, two long and needle-like utensils used to probe the uterus for different types of growths.

In One Hundred Years of Gynaecology, 1800–1900, James Ricci discusses how the development of gynecology into the nineteenth century’s largest field of medical specialization was accompanied by countless new procedures and instruments. As he puts it, “The female genital organs were subjected to minute analysis and [different] areas were described in detail” (5). Gynecologists created four-hundred different kinds of specula and used them, along with the sound and the curette, to boldly “explore the cavity of the uterus” (25). Although Ricci does not mention it, the spectacular expansion of gynecology in the 1830s and 40s—as well as the controversies he notes over women’s submission to hazardous treatments involving sounds and curettes—must be understood in terms of women’s quest for reproductive control. A curette, for instance, was not in all cases used to tap benign uterine cysts. Many nineteenth-century American women would have learned how to read the secondary meanings of gynecological procedures and advertisements. Making something illegal or illicit does not repress it, as Foucault reminds us, but rather multiplies ways of saying and not saying it:

‘Suppose you detail,’ said [the narrator of “The Purloined Letter”], ‘the particulars of your search.’

‘Why the fact is,’ [replied the Prefect] . . . ‘we searched every where. . . . We opened every possible drawer; and I presume you know that, to a properly trained police agent, such a thing as a secret drawer is impossible. Any man is a dolt who permits a “secret” drawer to escape him in a search of this kind. The thing is so plain. There is a certain amount of bulk—of space—to be accounted
for in every cabinet. . . . After the cabinets we took the chairs. The cushions we probed with the fine long needles you have seen me employ. From the tables we removed the tops."

‘Why so?’ [asked the narrator] . . . ‘Couldn’t the cavity be detected by sounding?’ . . .

‘By no means, if, when the article is deposited, a sufficient wadding of cotton be placed around it.’

. . .

‘But you could not have removed—you could not have taken to pieces all the articles of furniture in which it would have been possible to make a deposit in the manner you mention. A letter may be compressed into a thin spiral roll, not differing much in shape or bulk from a large knitting-needle, and in this form it might be inserted into the rung of a chair, for example. . . . I presume . . . you probed the beds and bed-clothes’

. . .

‘Certainly: we opened every package and parcel. . . . We also measured the thickness of every book-cover, with the most accurate admeasurement, and applied to each the most jealous scrutiny of the microscope. Had any of the bindings been recently meddled with it would have been utterly impossible that the fact should have escaped observation. Some five or six volumes, just from the hands of the binder, we carefully probed, longitudinally, with the needles.’

. . .

‘You looked into the cellars?’

‘We did.’ (335–337)

With trenchant echoes of gynecological instruments and procedures, and through droll metaphors for the dark interiority of the female anatomy (cabinets, cavities, cellars), this dialogue represents the unrepresentable: the secret of abortion contained within the purloined letter.30 "What is all this boring, and probing, and sounding, and scrutinizing with the microscope . . . ?," asks Dupin in both a condensed recapitulation of the telling verbs and an almost verbatim duplication of the language of surgical gynecology (341). Like everything else in the tale, that which is private, secret, and unsaid is at the same time public, clear, and apparent—at least when approached through a particular frame of reference.

As a result, gestures and words meant to disguise information may in fact divulge it. This is Dupin’s advantage. Behind his dark glasses and ironic statements, he reads both linguistic and corporeal
signs: the Minister’s sham laziness, the Prefect’s vocal hesitations. The question of the body’s production of signs also occurs in the tale’s attention to handwriting; it seems that handwriting is something unique, inherently recognizable, something that ties, like an umbilical cord, the production of the words to the producer of them. It’s because the letter is in the woman’s distinctive handwriting that she is in such trouble. Furthermore, Dupin remarks that the Minister will know who fooled him with a new letter because Dupin’s own handwriting will be familiar to him. We also observe the Prefect write and sign the reward check for Dupin. In each case, the handwriting at once materializes a source and a destination.

But, twice the word “fac-simile” occurs in the tale, thus collapsing any guarantee or endorsement of authenticity (347, 348). “The Purloined Letter” here opens onto the issue of passing that follows from its exploration of adultery and abortion. In other words, if bodies give something away or express something authentic, it is because a conceptual framework of surface and depth, of the feigned and the bona fide, is already in place. What is counterfeit in one context is sterling in another. Though the body may be a source of signifying innovations, there is nothing inherent in the blood, nothing that yields a timeless secret or value. Even a maternal body, with its pronounced dilation, can be concealed or circumvented, and the question of paternity can certainly be covered up.

Dupin returns exactly this possibility to the woman in “The Purloined Letter.” If there is a child born (after all that probing), then Dupin permits it to pass as legitimate, realizing that passing is all there is. If an abortion took place, he leaves it out of his scheme’s equation; his goal is not to see the woman punished as an adulteress who tried to get rid of the evidence. Though motivated by his own desire to outwit the Minister and to cash in on the reward, Dupin’s remarks about the success of his reasoning resonate with significance about blood quantum, legitimacy, and morality. He states:

‘[M]athematical reasoning is merely logic applied to observation upon form and quantity. The great error lies in supposing that even the truths of what is called pure algebra, are abstract or general truths. . . . What is true of relation—of form and quantity—is often grossly false in regard to morals, for example. . . . There are numerous other mathematical truths which are only truths within the limits of relation. . . . [O]ccasions may occur where $x^2 + px$ is not altogether equal to $q$.’ (342–43)
His words here seem to directly quote and disparage the kind of racial "science" circulating in early nineteenth-century America and evident in this 1815 algebraist's theorem:

... [T]he algebraical notation is the most convenient and intelligible. Let us express the pure blood of the white in the capital letters of the printed alphabet, the pure blood of the negro in the small letters of the printed alphabet, and any given mixture of either, by way of abridgment in MS. letters.

Let the first crossing be of \(a\), a pure negro, with \(A\), pure white. The unit of blood of the issue being composed of the half of that of each parent, will be \(\frac{a}{2} + \frac{A}{2}\). Call it, for abbreviation \(b\) (half-blood).

Let the second crossing be that of \(b\) and \(B\), the blood of the issue will be \(\frac{b}{2} + \frac{B}{2}\), or substituting \(\frac{b}{2}\) its equivalent, it will be \(\frac{a}{4} + \frac{A}{4} + \frac{B}{2}\). Call it \(q\) (quarteroon) being \(\frac{1}{4}\) negro blood.\(^{32}\)

The algebraist then continues through several more mathematical formulas, concluding with "e": "But if \(e\) be emancipated, he becomes a free white man, and a citizen of the United States to all intents and purposes" (114). For Dupin, the world cannot be so neatly ordered; it is a place of metaphors and combinations and not of rigid categories. Repudiating the kind of black-and-white notions which dictate, for instance, that no one man can be both “mathematician and . . . poet,” he refuses to allow the purloined letter to be put in the service of taxonomies of blood and legitimacy (Poe 344). In the end, his thinking averts the kind of fratricidal violence implied in the myth of Atreus and Thyestes, which, in 1845, amounts to a foreboding message about the escalating rhetoric surrounding racial identity, white motherhood, and the future of the nation.

NOTES

3. See Walters’ Introduction to Primers for Prudery: Sexual Advice To Victorian Americans, in which he analyzes 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,” 136–80. 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, 41–2).

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 nineteenth 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 rise of restrictive legislation 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.

13. Walters, Primers for Prudery, 2.


18. “Seminar;” 81.

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).

20. For example, on the front page of Madame Restell, by a physician of New York, the author included the epigraph, “Thou shalt not commit adultery.”


22. The Dupin trilogy repeatedly calls our attention to written material: the reward check, the letter, and the Prefect’s notes in “The Purloined Letter”; the books, newspaper articles, and the reward notice for the orangutan in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”; the quoted newspaper articles that make up the majority of “The Mystery of Marie Rogeret.”

23. The Purloined Poe, 95.

24. The Origin of Life, 723.

25. The word “blackmail” had entered the language about a half-century
before Poe’s time. For a great discussion of blackmail and its link to the policing of sexual standards, see McLaren, *Sexual Blackmail*.

26. 119.

27. To offer just three examples here: Burgeland, *Physiological Observations*, which asserts that “the Negro Race nearly approaches the monkey” (36, Burgeland’s italics); Walker, *Interracial Mating, or the Mode in Which, and the Causes Why, Beauty, Health and Intellect Result from Certain Unions, and Deformity, Disease and Insanity, from Others*, which establishes criteria for mate selection; and Lugol, *Why Will You Die, or Researches on Scrofula*, with reference to the propagation of disease by inheritance and intermarriage, which imagines great families becoming “extinct” because of “defects” produced by “cross[ing] the races” (106, 233).


29. See Dixon, *Perilous Chastity: Women and Illness in Pre–Enlightenment Art and Medicine* for an in–depth discussion of this condition. Dixon’s study of numerous paintings of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century lovesick women highlights the repeated depiction of a woman with open legs before a firepot or a fireplace. See, in particular, her chapter titled “The Womb Occupied, Restored, and Satiated: Corporeal Cures” for the references to *furor uterinus* in medical treatises, proverbs, emblem books, and dictionaries of the time. Though Dixon does not mention it, many of the paintings she reproduces for discussion also depict the spread–legged woman holding a letter, the contents of which we cannot see, as she swoons before a doctor.

30. This notion of the obscured representation of abortion is also asserted by Laura Saltz in her essay on “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt.” Demonstrating that Poe knew that a botched abortion was the probable cause of Mary Rogêt’s death and drawing on the newspaper accounts of Madame Restell’s trials, Saltz argues that “The Mystery” is a tale that buries an abortion within its elliptical, layered narrative. Saltz also discusses “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” the other tale in the trilogy that includes “The Purloined Letter,” but she only once refers to “The Purloined Letter.” In a provocative assertion, she states: “Like the purloined letter, her [Marie’s] corpse is visible, but the undisclosed crime against her is held in sufferance” (242).

31. I don’t necessarily mean to turn Dupin into a reproductive–rights hero here; it’s implied, for instance, that he holds onto the letter until the reward exponentially increases. In other words, by waiting for things to get bigger and bigger, he prolongs the woman’s anxiety and possibly waylays her option of seeking an abortion. What Dupin seems most invested in—other than the money—is the permission for something or someone to be two things at once.


**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


