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**A NOTE ON POE'S "BERENICE":
A CLASSICAL SOURCE FOR THE NARRATOR'S FANTASY**

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Any interpretation of "Berenice" must offer a plausible explanation for its most controversial element, Egaeus's fixation on his cousin's teeth. David Halliburton's view is largely phenomenological: Egaeus contemplates the object of the teeth because he cannot confront the actual object of his desire, his cousin.¹ Claiming the fundamental truth of the narrator's life is that "nonsexual ideas have always taken the place of forbidden sexual emotions,"² Joel Porte provides a psychological reading. Harry Levin discusses Egaeus's fascination in the archetypal terms of "sexual folklore" wherein this tooth-fetish is "vulgarly adumbrated."³ Another possible explanation arises, however, from the very nature of Egaeus and his self-described background. Poe may have had in mind the Classical myth of Cadmus as a framework for the fantasy world constructed by his monomaniacal narrator.⁴ In fact, this myth can provide an insight into what has been seen by many as an unprepared for, illogical, and horrifying "effect" of the conclusion when Egaeus realizes that he has extracted his cousin's teeth.

That Poe's knowledge of the Classics was extensive is commonplace. Moreover, T. O. Mabbott has pointed out that in "Berenice" and "Shadow—A Parable" (both of which were written at approximately the same time), as well as throughout his career, Poe used a "favorite" source, Jacob Bryant's *Antient Mythology*.⁵ Because Bryant's work includes several references to Cadmus, Poe was doubtless aware of the myth.⁶

Poe immediately establishes his narrator as a man immersed in a world of Classical learning. Egaeus, whose very name suggests his Hellenic nature (as Berenice does hers), admits that he was born in the family library. He "loitered away"⁷ his boyhood not in the outside world, but amidst such Classical writers as Simonides. Never leaving "the wild dominions of monastic thought and erudition," Egaeus speaks a language laden with Classical allusions to Greek myth (e.g. Naiads, Halycon).

He has been so long cloistered in his library—what he calls his "fairy-land"—that the world of erudition has become his reality; the library is, as David Halliburton rightly describes it, an objective

correlative for Egaeus's consciousness.⁸ The narrator himself admits to this "inversion": "The realities of the world affected me as visions, and as visions only, while the wild ideas of the land of dreams became, in turn,—not the material of my every-day existence—but in very deed that existence utterly and solely in itself."

In times of psychological crisis, Poe's narrators often build fantasy worlds drawn from their erudition.⁹ It is possible, therefore, that Egaeus, living in "the disordered chamber of my brain," might choose one of the best-known Greek legends, one that being so steeped in the Classics he cannot help but be acquainted with—that of Cadmus's founding of Thebes. Had Egaeus forever dwelt apart from the remainder of humanity, he might have kept his tenuous grasp on reality. The philosopher, however, begins, only after his cousin has been stricken by a debilitating disease, to be attracted to her. Certainly he is a very lonely man in need of companionship, but why, then, does he wait to propose (that "evil moment") until she has been reduced to barely alive?

An erudite recluse, Egaeus obviously cannot cope with the real world as much as he would like. But in her sickness the emaciated Berenice is less real, less human. Still, as the nuptials approach, he "shuddered," "grew pale," and "shrank involuntarily" at her presence. We have here a classic approach-avoidance conflict: the human side of Egaeus wants companionship; the philosopher side is afraid. In his crisis the nineteenth-century Prufrock fixates on one aspect of his cousin—her teeth. Their "white and ghastly spectrum" becomes for him ideas ("*toutes ses dents étaient des idées*"). Then comes the darkness and with "the mists of a second night" the loss of reality. Suddenly Berenice appears to die. Part of Egaeus's dilemma is solved, but he still lacks companionship.

In his isolated universe, Egaeus's role models come not from actual experience, but from books found in his library chamber, his "palace of the imagination." So why the teeth? Perhaps his distorted "mental eye" has already begun focusing subconsciously on the Cadmus myth and the superficial parallels it seems to offer to his situation. Like Cadmus, Egaeus is alone in his empty world, a world he wants populated. As Cadmus had been separated from his dear sister Europa, so Egaeus is kept apart from his beloved cousin. As Cadmus turned to Apollo and Athena, deities associated with learning and wisdom (interestingly Athena is idea personified, for she sprang full-grown from the head of Zeus), Egaeus has always been devoted to

"attentive" and "speculative" philosophy. And like Cadmus, Egaeus then follows the specific advice of the elevated source. Athena counselled Cadmus that to found a race he must return to the slain dragon, pull its teeth, and sow the earth with them; from these teeth will spring the future populators of Thebes.

Responding to his subconscious fantasy, the crazed Egaeus goes to Berenice's grave (the slain dragon), and extracts "thirty-two small, white and ivory-looking substances" in order to populate his lonely world. Significantly, his journey to the grave represents his one and only venture into the real world, what he calls "a confusing and exciting dream," outside his chamber. Returning with the tokens of the real world, however, he cannot fully re-enter his former world of pure philosophy.

Thus, he is found in his library reduced to a passive, unaware state. He is now caught in a nether region somewhere between the real world and the philosophical chamber. As he cannot function in the real world, so the teeth cannot function in his fantasy world. As the teeth remain in an unopened box, so Egaeus sits alone in his closed chamber. The ineffectuality of both the teeth and the narrator produces the immobility of madness.

Therefore, the Cadmus myth would explain not only why the narrator is fascinated with Berenice's teeth in particular, but also, unlike many interpretations, it sheds light on Egaeus's madness, especially his solitary and catatonic state at the end of the tale.

NOTES

¹ *Edgar Allan Poe: A Phenomenological View* (Princeton, 1973), pp. 195-206.

² *The Romance in America* (Middletown, CT, 1972), pp. 79-84.

³ *The Power of Blackness* (New York, 1958), p. 156.

⁴ We gratefully acknowledge the suggestions and advice of Professor Michael Johnson of State University College at Buffalo, NY.

⁵ *M*, 2: 192, 220, 595.

⁶ See, for instance, Jacob Bryant, *A New System; or, an Analysis of Antient Mythology*, 3rd ed. (London, 1807), 5: 51-59.

⁷ *M*, 2: 210.

⁸ Halliburton, p. 200.

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⁹ The narrator of "The Fall of the House of Usher" bases his view of the strange events at the mansion in part on Roderick's and his arcane readings. Montresor's fantasy, derived from his knowledge of his family heritage and the historical situation of Protestant-Catholic warfare, duplicates immolation for his enemy. And Ligeia's husband imaginatively replicates the world of metaphysics and German transcendentalism he once enjoyed with his first wife.