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**MONTRESOR'S UNDERLYING MOTIVE:
RESAMPLING "THE CASK OF AMONTILLADO"**

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The most crucial problem in Poe's "Cask of Amontillado" is probably that of Montresor's motive for immuring Fortunato. In an earlier article treating this subject—proceeding from the belief that the usual historical and religious reasons suggested by critics were inadequate—I argued that Poe develops intricate parallels between the two men in order to demonstrate the psychological process of transference: "Montresor unconsciously projects himself into Fortunato. Montresor's revenge, then, is not a ritual of sacrifice, but of scapegoating." My theory was that Montresor was motivated by a desire to exorcise his despised dilettantish self.¹

In retrospect, I still agree with this general interpretation, but the ascribed motive no longer seems sufficient to explain either the radical act of murder or the unusual method chosen. I wish to amend my earlier effort by suggesting a more comprehensive motive for Montresor's actions.

Recent literary criticism has broken through the barriers of social taboo to explore new ground. Although both Poe and his characters have been psychoanalyzed, one important area of psychology has been ignored. An investigation of Montresor's sexual nature, in fact, suggests an explanation for his homicidal act, its methodology, and its attendant guilt. Specifically, Poe's protagonist may be a latent homosexual whose maltreatment of Fortunato arises from his attempt to cope with his own sexual identity.

Although Poe reflects the nineteenth-century reticence in dealing with homosexuality, he nonetheless offers several hints about his character's sexual preference. Proceeding from the stereotype of Montresor as an artistic and dilettantish aristocrat, Poe foils his protagonist with Fortunato. Although extraordinary parallels exist between the two men (enumerated in my earlier article), one distinction stands out: Fortunato is married. The importance of this detail is emphasized by Montresor's admission of his family's decline: "The Montresors . . . were a great and numerous [italics mine] family."² Later, he reveals that, to empty his house, he had only to trick his servants. One conclusion seems clear—that Montresor has no family living with him. Since he does reside in his ancestral "home," it is logical to assume that he, like Roderick Usher, is the last of his

formerly "numerous" line. Poe thus sets up an interesting mystery: given the aristocratic obligation to continue the lineage, why hasn't Montresor done so? Might his sexual preference preclude the production of progeny?

Another suggestion of Montresor's homosexuality involves his actions toward Fortunato. Initially Montresor describes his friend's physique—"He had on a tight-fitting parti-striped dress"—a detail that excites Montresor into emphasizing subsequent physical contact: "I thought I should never have done wringing his hand." During their fatal journey, Montresor, caught up in the action, notes how twice his friend takes his arm and how he himself "made bold to seize Fortunato by an arm above the elbow" as well as how again "offering him my arm . . . He leaned upon it heavily." The descent into the dark recesses of the vaults culminates in a revelation of the dark side of homosexuality, the sado-masochistic act of immurement. Here Montresor not only notes that he fettered his antagonist, but also describes with relish every detail of the act.

Montresor further betrays his physical preoccupation through the use of sexual—especially phallic—images. As the story opens, Montresor immediately notices Fortunato's "conical cap"—a sexual pun? Then, Montresor conducts his friend "through several suites of rooms to the archway that led into the vaults." They descend "a long winding staircase" until they stand "together upon the damp ground of the catacombs." Drawing a bottle of Medoc "from a long row of its fellows that lay upon the mould," Montresor knocks off its neck and hands it to Fortunato, suggesting the oral nature of his own phallic (un)consciousness. Poe even uses the Montresor family crest, a "serpent rampant whose fangs are imbedded in the heel," to reflect his narrator's preoccupation. Montresor breaks open another wine bottle (which Fortunato immediately downs), then produces from "beneath the folds of my roquelaire a trowel." Passing through "a range of low arches," they finally arrive at the sado-masochistic chamber, where "colossal supports" hold up the roof. Upon chaining his antagonist, Montresor says, "Unsheathing my rapier, I began to grope with it about the recess." Later Montresor repeats this homoerotic symbolism: "I thrust a torch through the remaining aperture and let it fall within." The abundant sexual images, specifically designed to describe a covert encounter with another man, hint strongly Montresor's homosexual nature.

As my earlier article showed, the immurement of Fortunato is an objective correlative for Montresor's act of repression. Unable to deal with his homosexuality and noting the surface parallels between himself and Fortunato, Montresor makes his fellow aristocrat into his scapegoat. As he progressively isolates Fortunato with chains and then

a wall, Montresor is unconsciously transferring his homosexuality to something he will no longer have to face. Nearly finished with his ritual, Montresor hears Fortunato issue a "succession of loud and shrill screams," to which, in the manner of Robin of Hawthorne's "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," he replies in an unconscious attempt at cathartic exorcism: "I re-echoed, I aided, I surpassed them in volume and strength."

That Montresor's attempted repression is unsuccessful shows throughout his confession. Describing his crime some fifty years later in such lurid detail and seemingly without a shred of remorse suggests that the crime is less important than some more deep-seated guilt. The murder, then, is not at the heart of Montresor's deathbed confession; it is a symptom of a larger problem, much like the narrator's alcoholism in "The Black Cat." Montresor's guilt is two-fold: as a devout Catholic, he agonizes over a sexual identity deemed "unnatural" by the church; and as an aristocrat, he laments his inability to go forth and multiply. Ironically, on his deathbed Poe's narrator can no more outwardly admit to his sexual proclivity than he could have a half century earlier. Like a patient on a psychologist's couch, he reveals the truth only through veiled images and suggestions. Poe, then, seems to have anticipated Freud's assertion (in connection with the Schreber case) that a significant element in paranoid psychopathology is the projection onto others of homosexuality unacceptable to the patient.³

So, it may be that Montresor's motive for immurement is personal and/or family honor, perversity, or religious revenge. But, is it not possible also that Poe, who dealt with so many psychological problems, could have provided like his contemporary Melville an insight into the nature of homosexuality?

NOTES

¹"Retapping Poe's 'Cask of Amontillado,'" *PoeS*, 8 (1975), 10-12.

²Edgar Allan Poe, "The Cask of Amontillado," in *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Thomas Olive Mabbott (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), 3: 1252-1265.

³"Psychoanalytic Notes upon an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia," *Collected Papers* (London, 1924), 3: 387-470.