



Edgar Allan Poe: The Masque of the Red Death

(1842)

- [Slobodan Sucur \(University of Alberta\)](#)

Genre: Gothic & Ghosts, Story. Country: United States.

“The Masque of the Red Death” (1842) is considered by Poe scholar T.O. Mabbott a “masterpiece” among his “very short stories” (*Poe* 2:667). Originally published for *Graham’s Magazine* in May of 1842 under the title “The Mask of the Red Death. A Fantasy”, reprints followed in the Baltimore *Saturday Visiter* and *The Literary Souvenir* of Lowell, Massachusetts, both in that same year. By July of 1845, the text was published under its now well-known title in *The Broadway Journal* (*Poe* 2:670). Poe made minor revisions to the tale prior to its later reprinting in 1845, with the most obvious change being the title itself, which now emphasises the masquerade that takes place rather than any one individual who has dressed up for the celebration. Plot wise the text reads like an odd fairy tale, with a third-person voice retelling events that took place in a “castellated abbey” belonging to “the Prince Prospero”, in a time when a plague known as the “Red Death” was “devastat[ing] the country”. Contriving to escape this plague and offering sanctuary to “a thousand [of his] hale and light-hearted friends” (*Poe* 2:670), Prospero had walled up the abbey and put on a magnificent masquerade for the courtiers after five or six months of seclusion, hoping to remain immune to the pestilence raging outside the walls. The masquerade, relates the narrator, was held in a heptagonally-shaped “imperial suite” that provided a “voluptuous scene” since its seven rooms were elaborately furnished and differently coloured (*Poe* 2:671). However, all proved futile as an antidote to the plague, since it somehow infiltrated the walls of the castle and eventually killed both Prospero and his entourage (*Poe* 2:676), most likely in the form of one partygoer who, disobeying Prospero’s rules for the masquerade, came dressed as a personification of the Red Death itself—his face “besprinkled” with blood (*Poe* 2:675).

Mabbott sees in the text a “clear moral that one cannot run away from responsibility” (*Poe* 2:668), even though Poe himself was ambivalent on the question of allegory, a good example of his views being the review of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s tales in the November 1847 issue of *Godey’s Lady’s Book*. There Poe writes that allegory always “interfere[s] with that unity of effect which, to the artist, is worth all the allegory in the world”. Frederick S. Frank and Anthony Magistrale suggest, balancing out atmospheric and allegorical readings, that the “tale’s unity of horror arises out of the stark realization that ‘Death conquers all,’ a fact that must be learned by those who attempt to shut it out” (223-4). Mabbott believes the main source of the tale’s plot to be found in the 16th letter of N.P. Willis’ “Pencilings by the Way” that was published in the *New-York Mirror* in June of 1832, and which describes how, during the cholera epidemic in Paris that year, many people determined to make what might be a short life a very enjoyable one, and threw many balls and masquerades. Willis’ description of one of these masquerades includes “some two thousand people...in fancy dresses...and one man, immensely tall, dressed as a personification of the *Cholera* itself, with skeleton armor, bloodshot eyes, and other horrible appurtenances of a walking pestilence” (qtd. in *Poe* 2:668). Other possible influences include

Boccaccio's *Decameron*, where a group of people retire to a castle to avoid a plague and tell stories to one another, and Thomas Campbell's *Life of Petrarch*, reviewed by Poe in September of 1841 for *Graham's Magazine*, and which includes a story of a nobleman who, much like Prospero in Poe's tale, tried unsuccessfully to hide from a plague in his castle (*Poe* 2:668). More obscure parallels, Mabbott suggests, include the medieval Black Death of the late 1340s, the "first plague of the Egyptians" described in Exodus, and King Gustav III of Sweden's assassination at a masqued ball in 1792, this last example being the "basis of Verdi's [1859] opera *Un Ballo in Maschera*" (*Poe* 2:669). Frank and Magistrale write that Poe's Prospero is named "after Shakespeare's godlike creator of his own private and inviolable world in *The Tempest* [1611], [and that he] also closely resembles William Beckford's sensuous and selfish caliph, Vathek, in his decadent behavior, lavish indulgences, and proud seclusion from the suffering masses of humanity" (224). They strengthen the Shakespearean connection further by suggesting that the title of the text itself is "taken from Caliban's curse uttered against his master in I.ii.364: 'the red plague rid you'" (314). William Bittner believes one of the many influences on the plot may have been Virginia Poe's bursting of a blood vessel while singing in January of 1842 (qtd. in *Poe* 2:677).

The first three paragraphs of the tale set the stage for Prince Prospero's masquerade. The Red Death is described as having "long devastated" the country and as killing its victims within "half an hour" after afflicting them with pain, dizziness, and "profuse bleeding at the pores" (*Poe* 2:670). Contrasted with this devastation is Prince Prospero, described as "happy and dauntless and sagacious", and as providing his thousand courtiers with "all the appliances of pleasure" so that the world outside could be avoided as consistently as possible. The contrast between the outside world and Prospero's cozy realm is further enhanced through the third-person narrator's stark diction at that point: "...security [was] within. Without was the 'Red Death'" (*Poe* 2:670-1). Five or six months into the courtiers' seclusion in Prospero's abbey, the Prince chose to entertain everyone with a "masked ball of the most unusual magnificence"; this, elaborates the narrative voice, took place while the "pestilence raged most furiously abroad" (*Poe* 2:671). Readers are then drawn into the masquerade atmosphere of the ball without further information being shared by the narrator about the nature of the plague, possibly a viral hemorrhagic fever of some kind such as the famous Plague of Athens that took place in 430 B.C. during the Peloponnesian War, considering that the Greek historian Thucydides describes that plague in terms similar to Poe's: "...people in good health were all of a sudden attacked by violent heats in the head, and redness and inflammation in the eyes...the throat or tongue...becoming bloody..." (qtd. in Finley 274).

The narrative voice, in the next several paragraphs, focuses on detailing the "voluptuous scene" that was Prospero's masquerade. Of particular interest to the narrator is the shape of the suite in which the party is held: perhaps owing to Prospero's "love of the *bizarre*", seven rooms in total are present, and shaped "irregularly" so that "the vision embraced but little more than one at a time" (*Poe* 2:671). Each room is a different colour, with a single "stained glass" window present that matches the colour of the room, the only exception being the seventh room in which the window and furnishings are not colour coordinated. From first to last, the rooms are coloured blue, purple, green, orange, white, violet, and black, with the black room having a window of a "deep blood color". Light emanates from corridors outside the rooms and through the windows; this "produced a multitude of gaudy and fantastic appearances", with the effect produced by light shining through the scarlet window in the black room described as "ghastly in the extreme" (*Poe* 2:671-2). Of significance in these passages of the text is both the colour symbolism and heptagonal shape of the suite of rooms in which the festival takes place. Mabbott suggests that inability to see more than one room at a time, because of their organisation and shape, "symbolizes man's inability to see the future, or recapture the past" (*Poe* 2:677).

The fact that there are seven rooms present, arranged geometrically, may be evidence of Prospero's personal philosophy, and also conjures up images of that earlier Prospero made famous in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The symbol of the number seven is the heptagram, often known as the "Witch's Star" and suggesting occult possibilities. Shakespeare's Prospero draws a charmed circle in the sand towards the end of the play (V.i.57); Poe's Prospero, as the narrator emphasises via the organisation of rooms, may have drawn his magic circle

architecturally or as interior designer, or as both, considering that he “had directed, in great part, the moveable embellishments of the seven chambers” (*Poe* 2:673). Frank and Magistrale suggest that the “pleasure palace’s seven chambers correspond to the seven ages of man and, ironically, to the seven stages of deadly sin” (224). In Christianity, the seven deadly sins are pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, and sloth, all possibly symbolised by the different rooms in Prospero’s abbey. In a Pagan context, seven is associated with the goddess Venus, particularly with feelings and instincts, the idea of a “Group Mind” (i.e., collective soul), and sexual energy. The courtiers are indeed presented as succumbing to Prospero’s “mad” influence and his plans that were “bold and fiery”, with the masquerade being described as having consisted of “glare and glitter” and “much of the wanton” (*Poe* 2:673). The dance of choice at the masquerade is the waltz, still considered “somewhat risqué in 1842” (*Poe* 2:677) and perhaps even more daring if read as an anachronism in a tale that Poe most likely sets either in the late Renaissance or Baroque period; however, Mabbott likens the Prince to the late Romantic, dandified and ornate protagonist of Poe’s early tale “The Assignation” (1834) (*Poe* 2:677).

Also referenced in these middle paragraphs of Poe’s story is “a gigantic clock of ebony” that “stood against the western wall” in the seventh apartment furnished with “black velvet tapestries” (*Poe* 2:672). This clock keeps time with a heavy pendulum and “monotonous clang” that erupts in a “deep” and “peculiar” sound every hour, relates the narrator, a sound so specific that the gay courtiers become temporarily disconcerted and the orchestra briefly pauses; this “nervousness” would be repeated every hour upon the clock’s chiming (*Poe* 2:672-3). The emphasis on the passage of time, through the clock’s sounds, gradually wears away at the courtiers’, and Prospero’s, illusions of invincibility that are heightened through the counterbalancing effect of the dizzying masquerade. The masquerade and clock thereby become diametrically opposed motifs in this tale, pulling the courtiers in opposite directions: time referencing reality, in which the Red Death is present (and more broadly mortality), and the festival referencing the false, insulated world of security and perpetual happiness that Prospero has constructed for his subjects. Mabbott comments that some of his students have seen links between the presence of seven rooms in the abbey and the passage of time signified by the clock, suggesting that the courtiers dance through the “seven days of the week” or even through the “seven parts of a day” (*Poe* 2:677). Of significance, too, is the mere fact that a large clock has been placed in the black room in the first place, since it serves to disrupt the unity of the masquerade. Its presence can therefore be read as one of Prospero’s many whimsical, even perverse, gestures to the courtiers.

With the masquerade atmosphere continuing into the night over the next several paragraphs, fewer courtiers are willing to enter the more oppressive solemnity of the darkest and most “westwardly” chamber (*Poe* 2:674). Contrasted here once again with the “feverish” and “whirling” courtiers is the striking of the large clock, this time having ushered in midnight with its “twelve strokes” and also “surprise”, “horror” and “disgust” among the revellers, for many in the crowd have become aware of the “presence of a masked figure” who “out-Heroded Herod” (a favourite phrase of Poe’s, taken from *Hamlet* [III.ii.16]). This “mummer”, as retold by the narrator, has gone beyond even Prospero’s “indefinite decorum” by daring to personify the Red Death itself and masquerading as a “stiffened corpse...dabbled in blood” (*Poe* 2:674- 5). While most of the courtiers are paralysed with fear, Prospero reacts with rage to the figure’s presence, calling on everyone to “unmask” this character who dared to “insult” them with “blasphemous mockery” (*Poe* 2:675). Of note is the Prince’s location when he utters these words; the narrator tells twice how Prospero was then, with several courtiers around him, standing in the “eastern or blue chamber”. The mysterious figure is also “near at hand” (*Poe* 2:675-6) before choosing with “measured step” to pass from the blue to the purple room, and then to the green, and orange, and white room, and finally to the violet one. It is then that Prospero, with “drawn dagger”, rushes through the chambers and towards the mummer, who has already entered the black room (*Poe* 2:676).

Both characters meet in the seventh room, the unknown figure turning to confront the Prince and Prospero falling almost instantly, “prostrate in death”. The mummer is then attacked by several of the courtiers, but upon stripping the clothing and mask off they are shocked to find no “tangible form” there (*Poe* 2:676). This character’s lack of physical presence opens the possibility that, rather than having merely personified the Red

Death, it was the Red Death itself that had entered the masquerade at midnight, but in human guise. Applicable here is an interpretation of the colour symbolism; blue is often associated with birth, beginnings, and youth. It is also a colour associated with truth and the future, and it is therefore not a coincidence that both the mummer and Prospero first find themselves in close proximity in the blue, easternmost room. Both the mummer's and Prospero's walks then take them through all of the rooms and into the black one with the red window pane; red can be interpreted in two ways, as the colour of danger, wrath, and Satan, but also as the colour of courage and sacrifice. It is possible to read Prospero as sacrificing himself for the good of his courtiers once he lunges at the rebellious partygoer, although it is more likely that he meets his death in a room linked with sin. Symbolically, while standing in the blue room upon first sight of the mummer, Prospero has then already seen into his future: it is one of death, at the hands of the mysterious red plague he has tried so consistently to keep out of his abbey.

The brief concluding paragraph of the tale admits to the "presence of the Red Death", a statement soon followed by the deaths of all revellers in the abbey and the emergence of the unholy trinity of "Darkness", "Decay" and the "Red Death", to hold "dominion over all" (*Poe* 2:677-8). Mabbott compares the rhymes of the last sentence to Alexander Pope's verse "universal darkness buries all" that concludes his *Dunciad* of 1728 (*Poe* 2:678). Harry Levin suggests a similar point, also comparing the lines to the conclusion of Pope's satire that "predicates a reduction of cosmos to chaos" (qtd. in *Poe* 2:678). Frank and Magistrale write that the final paragraph reads like a "clock-like peal of doom", since it "contains seven pulsating clauses, each commencing with 'and'" (224). Of broader significance is how the tale's grim conclusion contrasts with the previous, rowdy atmosphere of Prospero's masquerade. In relation to this, it is worthy of speculation whether the conclusion serves as didactic termination of the previous revelry, or, more in keeping with Poe's ambiguous stance towards allegory, if the dénouement is made possible through various imperfections in Prospero's design and the masquerade itself. Either way, the masquerade took an evil and more sensational turn at midnight via the mummer's entrance. Terry Castle argues that "Midnight Masques", particularly during the golden age of masquerades (c. 1710s to 1780s), were always the most notorious, taking place until six or seven in the morning and being frequented by pimps, prostitutes, and men and women of "quality" who were looking for a good and anonymous diversion from everyday responsibilities; sometimes even "gate-crashers" would sneak in without paying an entrance fee, and despite the security provided by gentlemen armed with muskets (Castle 1-37). Poe's impersonator of the Red Death can certainly be read as the gate-crasher in Prospero's abbey, strategically waiting for the clock to strike midnight before entering and bringing the entire party to a dramatic halt.

Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" has inspired various adaptations over the years, including Basil Rathbone's reading of the short story in an early 1960s' recording called *The Tales of Edgar Allan Poe*. Soon after, in 1964, the story was adapted into a film mixing plot elements with Poe's "Hop-Frog" (1849) and directed by Roger Corman: it was titled *The Masque of the Red Death* and starred Vincent Price. In 1975, George Lowther adapted the tale for a broadcast of the *CBS Radio Mystery Theater*, starring Karl Swenson. By 1989 another film remake had emerged, this time starring Adrian Paul as Prince Prospero. Of particular note is the tale's influence on theatrical dance productions. Burton R. Pollin writes that Poe in many of his writings "clearly manifests an extensive knowledge of various steps used in social dancing, all very naturally acquired" at parties hosted by the Allans and friends in Richmond, and later at the University of Virginia where he "participated in the frequent social functions" (508). Dance references abound in Poe's works, ranging from more comic tales such as "The Man That Was Used Up" (1839) and "The Spectacles" (1844) to more serious texts that include "The Masque of the Red Death" and the late tale "Hop-Frog", which also features a masquerade plot. "Red Death" has "occasioned the most Poe ballets of any of his texts...[and] this tale was to become the script or scenario of many dances" (Pollin 512). Examples range from Friedrich Wilckens' 1926 Vienna ballet *Don Morte* to the 1957 choreography of the tale by Andrée Howard as "Conte Fantastique" for the Ballet Rambert in London, and include even the dance passage in Corman's 1964 film, a masked ball scene that was choreographed by Jack Carter and set to music by David Lee. A more experimental "Red Death" was presented in Vancouver City in 1991 and was described as "a mixed media, dramatic monologue, dance and music" exhibition, with emphasis on the "seven ballrooms" present in Poe's original text (512-3).

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- [Slobodan Sucur \(University of Alberta\)](#)

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