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Sublime Women and the Supernatural Threat in Edgar Allan Poe's "Berenice", "Ligeia", and "Morella"

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Índice

Introduction

The image of the woman has been described historically, especially in love poetry, as muses or entities to be contemplated, adored, or even deciphered. Nonetheless, in Gothic literature and, particularly, in Edgar Allan Poe's context, women can be turned into something strange and terrorific. This dissertation explores how in Edgar Allan Poe's "Berenice", "Ligeia" and "Morella" there are certain narrative descriptions that objectify the women of his tales and transform them into a supernatural threat. While these tales have been interpreted from diverse perspectives, going from psychoanalysis, history to feminism and aesthetics, this dissertation instead focuses on the *effect* of the narration and the aesthetic experience. We believe it is important to highlight the contradictory effect the narration has on the characters of the tale, as female objectification leads to a dehumanization that implies a loss of corporality rather than an hyperfixation on the body.

The key terms which are relevant in the present dissertation are the sublime and the supernatural. The first term, the sublime, is a concept crucial to the development of Gothic literature as understood by the philosopher Edmund Burke, who defined it as an extreme beauty capable of causing exacerbated, overwhelming sensations such as awe, astonishment and fear. We understand the second term, the supernatural, as a phenomenon related to ambiguity, the strange, or, more specifically, an element that seems to be beyond the human as it has no rational explanation in the stories.

Regarding what has been previously explored on this subject, studies on Poe's female characters have been extensive, going from psychological readings towards feminist interpretations of the tales. The Dark Ladies tales in particular have received a lot of attention because they follow a specific narrative pattern. Floyd Stovall's "The Women of Poe's Poems and Tales" presents an overview of how Poe describes his female characters, both in his poetic and narrative works, classifying them as spiritual beings, deadly women, and ideal, preternatural women (198). Thus, Stovall and other scholars have grouped Berenice, Ligeia, Morella and, additionally, Madeline Usher from "The Fall of the House of Usher" as Poe's *Dark Ladies*, both for their physical traits and their macabre stories. Another relevant analysis on Poe's female characters is the one by Karen Weekes' "Poe's Feminine Ideal", as it explains how Poe's personal life influenced his fictional work, making an association to the fact that his mother and wife died young. This close personal relationship between femininity, love, and death makes Poe's work fall into "the realm of the sublime" (148), as the aesthetic experiences that are enhanced are the death and loss of a beautiful woman and the emotional excess of the bereaved lover, transforming the ladies into an "emotional catalyst for her partner" (148).

While those works highlight the patterns of characterization of Poe's women, many interpretations have been made from a feminist and psychoanalytic perspective. Tracy Hayes' "Poe, Insanity and Containing the Feminine Monstrous" interprets Poe's gothic heroines as figures of the monstrous-feminine: a threatening, horrifying woman that the male narrator has to contain and control (1), seeing Poe's female characters as both

victims and destructors who want to take revenge for their patriarchal oppression and objectification. Another psychoanalytic approach is made by Elisabete Lopes' "Unburying the Wife: A Reflection Upon the Female Uncanny in Poe's 'Ligeia'" as it highlights how the female body is presented as an uncanny object in the tales. Lopes characterizes Ligeia and most of Poe's gothic heroines as uncanny figures, described in terms of the strange and the ambiguous as they raise confusion, anxiety, and fear in the narrators. On a similar note, Jacqueline Doyle's "(Dis)Figuring Woman: Edgar Allan Poe's "Berenice"' focuses on the female body and its objectification, now in "Berenice". In the article, there is a link between the courtly love poetry's tradition of idolizing women's bodies and the fragmentation of their descriptions. The importance of the feminine body is linked to how the male narrator describes it, pointing towards a narrative violation of female individuality in the tales.

Bearing these perspectives in mind, what is innovative is that we focus more on a dehumanizing objectification of the Dark Ladies when we consider the aesthetic and descriptive aspect, rather than considering psychoanalytic concepts related to sexuality, the unconscious, the uncanny and the body. The structure of the following dissertation will consist of three chapters that will explain the process that the ladies go through from sublime objects to spectral, supernatural entities that pose a threat to the male narrators. The first one will explain how the narrative description of the ladies fall into the realm of the sublime, as the narrators of the tales fall into an obsessive scrutiny of their features, fragmenting the ladies' corporality, and giving them spectral qualities. The second chapter will focus on the element of knowledge present in the

tales, and how it further elevates the ladies as sublime objects, now as their intelligence and confidence give them a superiority over the male narrators that pose a threat to their dominance. Finally, the last chapter will further explain how the process of fragmentation and spectralization culminates in transforming the ladies into the Other, into supernatural entities that lose their human qualities by becoming something strange and terrifying.

Chapter One: Feminine Beauty as Sublime

In “Berenice”, “Ligeia” and “Morella”, the title characters are described with the intention of highlighting the qualities that make them beautiful or elevated. While characterizing them in these superior terms, Poe’s narrators depersonalize and objectify women as they fragment the ladies’ description, dividing their features and bodies. By doing this, they lose their human condition, now resembling non-human entities such as sirens, specters, phantoms, or shadows. Another element we noticed was that the women of these tales became sublime objects for their narrators, since the ladies possess a supreme beauty that fascinates the men while provoking fear and horror in them.

In this chapter we will focus on how the narrators scrutinize the ladies’ features one by one, objectifying them and taking away their human quality. Through this objectification of the female body, Poe’s ladies are transformed into elevated, ethereal entities as they are described with spectral, fantastic terminology, resulting in a paradoxical loss of their corporeality. Finally, the process of elevating the women through a fragmented and dehumanizing narration converts them into sublime objects for the narrators: objects that possess great beauty but that also obsess and terrify the male descriptors.

Fragmented Descriptions of the Female Body

There are a series of descriptive patterns that Poe follows when portraying the title women in the Dark Ladies tales. The most notorious one is their immense natural beauty, usually mentioned in careful descriptions of their facial features, hair, and stature. However, these detailed descriptions objectivize the ladies and distort them, as the narrators obsess over specific physical features.

This distortion occurs, for instance, when the narrators enumerate the ladies' physical features not by personalizing them but instead by isolating the parts of their bodies from the women. A consequence of this focus on the ladies' bodies is their objectification, roughly defined as "the seeing and/or treating a person, usually a woman, *as an object*" (Papadaki 2010) which corresponds to the treatment they receive from their narrators as they become objects to enhance the men's experiences. Therefore, the objectified descriptions begin when, instead of using the natural construction of the genitive, the narrators use the definitive articles *the* and *those*, as in "the forehead" or "the teeth" (Poe 102). This descriptive strategy can be understood as a fragmentation of the ladies' bodies, as the singularization of their features divides their bodies, *breaking* them into pieces.

In the case of Berenice, the narrator, Egaeus, carefully enumerates her facial features, detaching them from the rest of the body and scrutinizing them. He begins his description by mentioning her forehead, followed by her hair to conclude on her melancholic countenance:

> *The* forehead was high and very pale, and singularly placid; and *the* once jetty hair fell partially over it, and overshadowed *the* hollow temples with innumerable ringlets, now of a vivid yellow, and jarring discordantly, in their fantastic character, with the reigning melancholy of *the* countenance (102, emphasis added).

On the other hand, in "Ligeia", the title character's eyes are her most distinctive feature, which are also the source of major curiosity and occasionally distress for the narrator. He uses the same descriptive style as the narrator in "Berenice" does by referring to her features as "*the* lofty and pale forehead", "*the* raven-black naturally-curling tresses", "*the* skin rivalling the purest ivory" (112, emphases added) and so on. However, the narrator gives Ligeia's eyes a predominant role over the rest of her features by referring to them as "the large eyes of Ligeia" and "*those* eyes! *those* large, *those* shining, *those divine* orbs!" (113, emphasis added). By particularizing Ligeia's eyes, the narrator gives them a status which elevates and divinizes them, and, simultaneously, butchers them from their original human body. Thus, the narrator is fascinated by Ligeia's eyes not only for their beauty and allure, but because they have a "strangeness" to them that possessed him "with a passion to discover" their secret (113).

In her article "Unburying the Wife", Lopes proposes that Ligeia's eyes are "the uncanny body part that triggers the suspicion that Ligeia stands for more than what it

is shown", precisely because the narrator feels inclined to decipher their secret (42). While Lopes' interpretation is accurate, given that the uncanny is present in the *strangeness* of a familiar human body part such as the eyes, what we infer of this strangeness is that it has to do with a mystical, divine, or magical characteristic, closer to a sublime object that suspends the narrator's emotions in a combination of awe and fear.

As we have argued and considering that there is this contrast between the divinization itself and the fragmentation of Poe's Dark Ladies, the narrators refer to women by their different body parts instead of as a whole. When the narrators try to treat them as gods, i.e., divinize the women, they glorify each of the ladies' features individually. The fragmentation and the divinization of the individual and its body may seem contradictory but are part of a simultaneous process where the ladies are further mutilated and distorted. Therefore, this divinization needs the fragmentation to coexist, in order to worship unique parts of the body.

This fragmentation occurred, for instance, in Petrarch and how he portrayed women in an idolizing manner. We consider Petrarchan love poetry to be relevant because it seems to be an influence in the treatment that the Dark Ladies receive as elevated, glorified muses. Thus, we can say that the fragmented descriptions present in the tales resemble images used in courtly love poetry. In this respect, Vickers points out that in Petrarchan poetry there is an "obsessive insistence on the *particular*, an insistence that

would in turn generate multiple texts on *individual fragments of the body or on the beauties of woman*" (267, emphasis added). In other words, describing women not by her completeness but feature by feature is a peculiar manner to highlight the beauty of the ladies. Beauty as defined by Burke is "those qualities in bodies by which they cause love or *some passion* similar to it" (83, emphasis added), which corresponds to the appreciation the narrators make on the ladies, as their descriptions stem from *passionate* feelings of awe and curiosity over their features —as in their "unparalleled beauty" (101)—, their erudition, and their "pervading strangeness" (112). Nonetheless in these particular tales, instead of portraying the ladies from the perspective of love and romantic passion, the narrators highlight the strangeness and mystery of their lovers. Thus, the fragmented descriptions of the women make them even more strange and distorted. The ladies are described as beautiful not because the narrators have an especially romantic attachment to them, but more because the men see a strange, otherworldly quality in the women that is fascinating and entrancing.

Women depicted as shadows and specters

An attribute that also characterizes the title characters besides their beauty are their enchanting, fantastic-like voices which give them a spiritual dimension. The focus on sweet, thrilling voices is a staple in Poe's poetic language and, in the Dark Ladies tales in particular, the enchanting voices of these women highlight the objectified characterization that already occurs in the fragmented descriptions of their bodies, leading towards an ethereal, spectralized depiction.

In the tales, the narrators in “Ligeia” and “Morella” feel intrigued and enchanted by the voices of their wives, figuratively comparing them to music and melodies, although treated differently in both tales. In the first one, Ligeia’s voice helps to portray her in ethereal terms, as the narrator is fascinated by “the *thrilling* and *enthralling* eloquence of her low, *musical* language” (111, emphasis added) implying a positive quality to her voice. However, a turning point on the enchanting voices occurs in “Morella” when the narrator grows weary of his wife’s “musical language” comparing it to “an oppressing spell” (106). The contrast of a musical voice that fascinates but that also terrifies evokes to the reader the image of fantastic creatures such as fairies, witches or sirens, entities that present a threat to the narrator, adding the element of horror to the description. This duality between something understood as beautiful that produces horror seems to highlight even more the otherworldly, original beauty of the Dark Ladies, transforming them into elevated objects to be contemplated. In relation to this point, Mario Praz explains in “The Beauty of Medusa” that the Romantics saw a special kind of beauty in those objects that provoke fear or terror in the beholder, enhancing the aesthetic experience as “beauty [is] enhanced by exactly those qualities which seem to deny it” (27), where objects that produce pain, horror or sadness possess a new sense of thrilling beauty.

The emphasis on features that evoke non-human, fantastic entities is not the only characterization the narrators do. In both “Berenice” and “Ligeia”, the narrators contrast the enumeration of beautiful features with characteristics that deprive the

ladies from their corporeality. Egaeus, the narrator in “Berenice”, refers to her fiancé as an “abstraction” of an “earthly being”, as a “Berenice of a dream” (101). This intangible woman can be compared with what happens to Ligeia, when the narrator of that tale describes her as a “lightness” and “a shadow” (112), further depriving her from a body and instead transforming her, just as Berenice, on an abstraction of a human being, dehumanizing her.

Overall, taking into account first the objectification of the ladies produced by an obsessive desire to focus on their features, and later the mutilated and spectralized depiction of these women, we can see that there is a paradoxical relationship between the two concepts —objectification and fragmentation— that is possible because it is a constant process within the tales: the ladies are depicted as beautiful through the butchering objectification of their bodies which leads to them losing their corporeality little by little.

The Dark Ladies as sublime objects

The portrayal of Poe’s Dark Ladies through fragmented descriptions that objectify and dehumanize them convert Berenice, Morella and Ligeia into sublime objects for the narrators: the ladies become an object of profound curiosity and uncertainty that obsesses the men. These feelings transform into horror and terror when the ladies’ human quality is put into question, either because their bodies become distorted or

because they are losing their corporality. This combination of extreme emotions and beauty that arouses horror in us is what Burke defined as the sublime.

According to Burke, what is a source of sublime is "whatever is in any sort terrible . . . or operates in a manner analogous to terror", as it produces "the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" (36). Connecting this definition to the tales, the narrators are the ones who experiment the sublime by glorifying and transforming the Dark Ladies into objects that they scrutinize before and after they grow sick and die. The bereaved narrators are consumed by thoughts of their wives' beauty and strangeness, a key feature that Burke associates with the sensations that the sublime object arouses, when "the mind is so entirely filled with its [sublime] object that it cannot entertain any other" (53).

In Poe's tales, as the narrators contemplate the ladies, they contrast the women's ethereal beauty with the frightened, overwhelming sensations it arises in them. Egaeus, as he describes the change Berenice's beauty has gone through due to her illness, narrates that a "sense of insufferable anxiety" overwhelmed him whenever she was close. However, these anxious feelings were accompanied with a "consuming curiosity" over his fiancée's sickened state (102). The narrator in "Ligeia" is also amazed by her dead wife when he describes her presence as "a *shadow*—a faint, indefinite shadow of *angelic aspect*" (122, emphasis added), contrasting something that can be interpreted as an obscure presence to a divine, pure entity (an angel). In

“Morella”, the narrator is consumed by a profound, non-sexual passion for his wife that was “bitter and tormenting” (105) as he could not define what kind of passion it was. While it is clear that the passion is not of a romantic nature, these profound emotions confirm Morella as a beautiful subject that becomes sublime when her husband feels confused and intimidated by her mysterious qualities.

While at the beginning the intention is to show the supreme beauty of the Dark Ladies, their fragmented descriptions distort their figure. As their body is distorted, they become objects, to be adored and feared, acquiring an ethereal, non-human quality, as they lose their corporeality. Thus, the Dark Ladies go through a process where their bodies are so objectified, where their features are intensely scrutinized and butchered that they no longer have a body, as they are compared with non-material, incorporeal entities.

Chapter Two: Knowledge as Power and Threatening Women

As we noticed with the previous chapter, Poe's women were seen as beautiful and sublime objects. Yet, at the same time, through their narrative descriptions, they were butchered, objectified, deprived of personality, and agency. Nevertheless, there is an element which is missing in this interpretation: the narrators notice that the Dark Ladies have *something* which makes them more than a glorified object to be contemplated. They possess intellect and determination, which give them a status of superiority over their respective narrators. In other words, the male narrators of the tales feel threatened by the Dark Ladies because they gain a superiority over them, which clashes with their patriarchal power as husbands. The preeminence of these women is made evident after they rebel—through their immense intelligence, their determination and newfound assertiveness—against the passiveness that the narrator attempts to impose on them.

Mysterious Knowledge and Mentoring Women

One common element present in these tales is that there is a *supernatural* aspect of mysterious knowledge which alarms the narrators and makes them suspicious, since this knowledge the Dark Ladies possess is hidden from them. By having this wisdom, Poe's ladies take a mentoring role over their husbands as they guide them in their learning process.

A key factor for the power the women have over the narrator is their competence in studying and dealing with mysterious, occult knowledge, as opposed to the

hegemonic, male-centered, enlightened perspective of knowledge that favors reason. In these tales specifically, knowledge is a relevant feature because it defines the history of a character, as in the case of Morella or Egaeus —"Berenice"'s narrator—, or as something that the bereaved narrator and the lady bond over, as it happens in "Ligeia". The ladies are exceptionally intellectual, having a profound connection with knowledge that borders on the mystical, going from the metaphysical to the art of language. For example, Ligeia and Morella are experts in said intellectual fields, even traversing "all the wide areas of moral, physical and mathematical knowledge" (115). As they master the knowledge in different rational, hegemonic areas, one can assume that the ladies can also go beyond the limits of that conventional knowledge, perhaps by mastering more obscure, hidden wisdom. At first, the narrators admire the vast erudition of their lovers, but at some point, it is evident they cannot reach the same level of mastery, something they grow suspicious of. For instance, the narrator of "Morella" enjoys the lessons his wife gives him until her strange words "burned themselves" on his memory for their "strange meaning" and "unearthly tones" (106).

Berenice is an exception to the rule that is worth mentioning: while she herself is not the erudite of the story, the narrator is part of a tradition related to literacy. Egaeus' family is what he describes as a "race of visionaries" that have amassed a large library, characterized by contents of "peculiar nature". What that *peculiar nature* means specifically is never explained, but it is implied that the library chamber is a space of mystical nature, full of "spiritual and meaning" visions (97). Egaeus, then, is the master of this intellectual realm, and Berenice is just an occasional visitor of the library with no agency over this patriarchal place. An interesting idea to explain why Egaeus has a

control of the knowledge in the tale is put forward by Castillo, as she explains that the library is the space where the male author is free to indulge in his fantasies and creative visions: "As the artist-librarian 'gives body to his fantasies, he also makes reality into a phantom . . . ,' transforming the 'living woman' into a 'work of art,' a 'ghost or a shadow'" (Castillo qtd. in Doyle 16). Hence, by *patriarchal* we mean that Egeus controls the narration by objectifying and butchering Berenice, as he imposes his point of view and himself over his fiancée.

The narrators recognize that the wisdom the ladies have make them superior, surpassing the limits of what is known. There is mention of a mentoring relationship, where the ladies share what they know with the narrator, guiding him on his education. There is a constant comparison of Morella or Ligeia with the narrator, as if they were above him, while, at the same time, being a mentor to him. The narrator somehow feels relegated from his role of husband to become a "pupil" (105) or even a child before his lady, as he is guided "through a chaotic world" (115) of mystic obscure dealings.

Nonetheless, there is always something concealed or out of reach: the narrators start to feel threatened when they realize that their lovers are hiding what their knowledge *truly* entails. Poe's Dark Ladies know considerably more than the narrator and hide what they are aware of without saying anything to their husbands.

The narrator in “Morella” is aware that her metaphysical investigations have transformed into something dangerous when they are “poring over *forbidden* pages” (105, emphasis added) and he feels “a *forbidden* spirit enkindling within [him]” (106, emphasis added) when Morella touches his hand, as if he was being cursed by her. This idea goes on a similar line with what Stovall points out when he says that, while Ligeia and Morella share the magical, mystical component (*forbidden spirit*), in Morella there is also “something about her that *savors of evil*” (203, emphasis added), as if she was a witch or someone who possesses malignant powers. Stovall defends this idea perhaps by focusing on “forbidden pages”, “dead philosophy” or Morella’s words which had a “strange meaning” (106). Morella’s knowledge may be evil precisely because it is prohibited and strange; knowledge forbidden by conventional institutions and for men to access to.

The possibility of evil is latent, because the Dark Ladies always had an unreachable, ineffable quality: Ligeia’s eyes seem meaningful, but his lover cannot explain what that meaning is; Morella shares and discusses her metaphysical investigations with her husband but her words soon become unbearable for the narrator. Even Berenice, who is not as deeply learned as the others, has a potentially dangerous message in her smile when she goes to visit Egaeus in his family library, the symbol of knowledge in the tale. It is this ineffable quality that causes terror in the narrators, either because they cannot give a definition to that mysterious something or because they are afraid of the potential power the women have over them. This image of the powerful, mysterious woman that causes fear on the narrator hints at the sublime object as defined by Burke:

the strongest emotion that the narrators feel is that of horror at that greater threat they cannot understand.

Determination, Defense and Threat

That undefined *something* might be the potential individual agency the Dark Ladies have. We must keep in mind that the three ladies in Poe's tales were presented as submissive, with no voice of their own and with little character. In the cases of Morella and Ligeia, what is said about them is constantly depicted from the narrator's perspective. Berenice does not speak in the entire tale. Hence, considering this former invisible and silent attitude, after the Dark Ladies act in a confident, assertive manner, the narrators are disturbed. In fact, this new aspect is shown as power, determination or will when they are dying and, therefore, acquiring a horrific quality in the eyes of their husbands.

The transformation to a more dominant, assertive character in "Berenice" creates a series of conflicting emotions for the narrator, going first from pity, then to curiosity, to finally a sense of dread over the strangeness of the new Berenice. At first described as a passive, bright young woman of unparalleled beauty, Berenice's illness, or "fallen and desolate condition", prompts a physical, psychological, and moral change that perplexes Egaeus (101). What unnerves the narrator the most though is Berenice's smile, as he sees something indecipherable in it: "The eyes were lifeless, and lustreless, and seemingly pupilless, and I shrank involuntarily from their glassy stare to the

contemplation of the thin and shrunken lips. They parted; and in a *smile of peculiar meaning*, the teeth of the *changed* Berenice disclosed themselves slowly to my view." (102, emphasis added). Instead of taking Berenice's change as a natural deterioration caused by her illness, the narrator fights to look for a meaning to her emaciated state, and finds it in the unnerving, cryptic smile Berenice gives him the night before she dies. A simple smile can be shocking if it is put into a seemingly character-less, passive woman like the healthy Berenice, because a smile is not only an expression of kindness or amusement, but also a showing of one's teeth, in both a literal and metaphorical sense. As Doyle points out by referencing a figure of speech associated with teeth (18), the showing of teeth is a sign of aggressiveness, or a glimpse into one's intentions, something that clashes with a passive Berenice that has never spoken with her own words in the tale. After all, everything we know about Berenice is from Egaeus' words and perspective. Thus, the smile as a show of intention may be a threat to Egaeus' control of the narration, because it makes us wonder: what if Berenice was always more than just a beautiful young woman? If the bereaved narrator saw this threat to his perspective, then his violent act at the conclusion of the tale may have a justification, as Weekes proposes in her essay "Poe's Feminine Ideal". While Weekes suggests that Berenice's smile can be read as a *memento mori* for her fiancée, a sexual invitation, or simply as a symbol of a emerging New Woman, Egaeus' act of desecrating Berenice's tomb to pull out her teeth is an attempt to "gain mastery over the ideas they represent" (156).

In the other two tales the threat that the women pose is much more difficult to control for the narrators. They demonstrate their determination against dying and subsequently disappearing from the narrator's lives through actions that defy logical explanation. Ligeia's act of determination is the most explicit of all the tales because she shows her passionate intention of living by coming back from death. In a move with vampiric and haunting undertones, Ligeia's spirit possesses the body of Lady Rowena, the narrator's second wife, therefore coming back to life, in tune with what was her most impressive trait: "her wild desire for life" (116). This supernatural possession was somehow foreshadowed in the poem Ligeia composes before she dies: in the tragedy of life, humans are "puppets" that are at the "bidding of vast formless things", characterized as crawling, intruding shapes (117). Considering that Ligeia becomes one of those intruding, formless things that bids Lady Rowena as her puppet, one can only wonder if this act of spirit possession was something Ligeia had planned in order to fulfill her desire for life.

The foreshadowing and the power of words happens in "Morella" and can even shed some light on the extent the knowledge of Poe's Dark Ladies can reach. Morella's assertive action rebels against the narrator's dismissive attitude towards her: he constantly mentions he did not love Morella romantically, as he "never spoke of passion, nor thought of love" (105), but rather he admired her intellectually, an affection which soon transforms into aversion and repulsion when he notices that her wisdom may be bordering on the obscure when Morella's words oppress him as a spell (106). The hostility toward his wife even makes him long "with an earnest and

consuming desire for the moment of Morella's decease" (107) when she is sick, so he can be free from her presence.

In their daily life, Morella never addresses the loathing the narrator feels towards her until her last days. In her deathbed, she beckons the narrator and talks to him in a cursing and later prophetic tone: "The days have never been when thou couldst love me—but her whom in life thou didst abhor, in death thou shalt adore" (107). She warns him that the child she will give birth to will bring the narrator a momentary happiness that will be replaced by "days of sorrow" (107). This meaningful scene also raises the question of the intentionality behind these words, just as Ligeia and her foreboding poem. Morella's last words sound more like a prophecy or a divination of the future rather than just a simple recrimination of the narrator's lack of love.

Overall, another element that defines the Dark Ladies, besides their elevated beauty, is their extensive body of knowledge. This vast erudition gives them superiority over the narrators, as the women become mentors to their lovers in occult, mystic themes. However, their knowledge and the superiority that comes with it become a tool of defense against the control the narrators have over them. Thus, as the ladies show determination and a desire to take control of how they are being treated by the narrators, the women become a threat that horrifies and that needs to be suppressed. As the Dark Ladies become a threat to the control the narrators have in the stories, it is relevant to remember Poe's poetic principle as presented in his essay "The

Philosophy of Composition": "The death . . . of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world, and equally it is beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover" (548). The *defense* we mentioned in this chapter, then, perhaps is a rebellion of Poe's Dark Ladies against that principle, which was determinant in the tales, besides the control of their bereaved lovers.

Chapter Three: Fragmentation and the Spectral Body

As we saw in the previous chapters, fragmentation was a key aspect while describing the Dark Ladies. The narrators broke them into pieces and all what we knew was depicted in what they witnessed or characterized. This process leads to the ladies' being described as ambiguous, otherworldly beings that fascinate for their intelligence and determination; however, those qualities start to scare and threaten the narrators, because it gives the ladies a dominant position. These elements of ambiguity and threat result in the spectralization of the women, as they are othered, made indescribable, strange, to set them apart from their own humanity and to shift the focus on the narrators' experience. As the ladies become the Other, they gain spectral qualities that horrify and torment the narrator, further depriving the women from their bodies and their humanity. Thus, the mixture of fascination and obsession from the narrators and the ambiguity and horror that the ladies evoke further strengthens the characterization of the sublime on the women.

Spectrality and Woman as the Other

Throughout the stories, the depiction of the ladies as specters is subtle, but extremely significant to understand the relationship between the narrators and the ladies. As we have mentioned, the fragmented descriptions not only objectify the women, but they also give ambiguity and uncertainty to their characters. As such, the spectralization is directly related to the objectification of the ladies, as they are alienated from their humanity due to the impressions the narrators have.

Spectrality, as a term, is anything related to specters or ghosts, something that blurs the limits between body and soul, life and death. According to Munford: "Neither fully present nor fully absent, material nor immaterial, the specter not only troubles the stability of the subject but renders categories of identity . . . uncertain and undecidable" (121). Then, the condition of spectrality is characterized by an ineffable quality: the spectral is hard to describe and categorize, confusing the observer, just as it occurs with the narrators in the Dark Ladies stories. Munford's idea presents a close relationship between femininity and the quality of spectralization: "Owing to its cultural associations with the territories of irrationality, otherness and corporeal excess, *femininity* has been particularly and peculiarly susceptible to 'spectralisation'" (120, emphasis added). Femininity, understood as a set of attributes that socially define womanhood, is linked to spectrality because women are considered as ambiguous, ineffable members of society in general.

In this sense, the phenomenon of spectralization occurs in "Berenice", "Ligeia" and "Morella" due to the *strangeness* the Dark Ladies bear and how, by mutilating their corporeality, they are transformed into ambiguous entities, as when the narrator in "Ligeia" mentions that her presence feels like a "shadow" (112) or when Egaeus describes that he saw Berenice as an "abstraction" (101).

Following this idea, the three Dark Ladies' ambiguity confuses the male narrators, because they do not know what causes it. The limits between life and death are blurred

after they die since the ladies are a constant presence in the narrators' minds, almost as if they were physically with him. As a matter of fact, the ambiguity between life and death in "Berenice" is literal: after apparently dying because of a cataleptic seizure, she is buried alive, a mistake that is discovered when Egaeus desecrates her tomb to take out her teeth, which he described as a "phantasma" (103) that plagued his mind, losing their materiality.

The non-corporeal is present in "Ligeia", when the narrator states that: "the quiet ease of her demeanor, or the *incomprehensible lightness* and elasticity of her footfall. She came and departed *like a shadow*" (112, emphasis added). What Ligeia's narrator highlights, besides her elevated manner, is the *incomprehensible* in her, as if a part of Ligeia is difficult to understand for the narrator because he believes that her eyes, and in consequence her, are hiding something inexplicable and obscure. Her spectral quality is visible when the narrator deems necessary to specify that she moves like a *shadow*—a non-corporeal, obscure figure.

The reliance on terms that describe ethereal, spectral beings helps elucidate the uncertainty and confusion the ladies cause on the narrators. Judith Butler explains that the ambiguity that permeates women is paradigmatic of a male-dominated language: "Within a language pervasively masculinist, a phallogocentric language, women constitute the *unrepresentable*. Namely, women represent the sex that cannot be thought, a linguistic absence and opacity" (14, emphasis added). According to this

idea, the opaque quality of women in a male-dominated society can be linked to the power relationship present in the Dark Ladies' tales, where the women become indescribable, obscure figures that are hard to define in the male-dominated narration. As previously mentioned in this dissertation, Berenice is seen as an "abstraction of a human" (101), while Ligeia is described as a "shadow" (112).

This power relationship occurs constantly throughout the stories as the narrators, on the one hand, suppress the voices of the ladies by speaking over what they have to say, and on the other, by portraying the ladies as a foreign force in their lives. The narrators do highlight the beauty and intelligence of the women as we saw in the previous chapters, but at the same time they are unsettled by an inexplicable quality that the ladies possess. That perturbed state of the narrators is a commonality in the three tales, as it is what drives their most extreme emotions of wonder, but most of all, of fear and suffering as they see the women as a threat to their dominance.

The strategy of spectralising the ladies results in setting them apart from their bereaved narrators, to center the story on men's suffering rather than on the ladies' individuality. This focus on men can be linked to what Beauvoir describes Woman as the Other in society: "She is defined and differentiated *with reference to man* and not he with reference to her; *she is the incidental, the inessential* as opposed to the essential" (16 emphasis added). As women are defined in reference to men, they become something beyond the norm: women are alien, indescribable, strange as we

have mentioned previously. In the case of Poe's tales, the narrators put the mark of the ladies as someone apart from him, from other women and even from humans. Even when Ligeia is described as extremely beautiful, she still is "either above or apart from the earth" (113). Namely, she may be considered supernatural, out of his world, out of the narrator's reach; since Ligeia is the Other, she is not in the same space as the narrator but described *by* him. Morella's erudition was so extraordinary that her "talents were of no common order" (105). In direct reference to Beauvoir's idea, Egaeus describes Berenice as an opposite to himself: where Egaeus was "ill of health and buried in gloom", Berenice was "graceful, and overflowing with energy" (98), the reference here being the narrator, used as a starting point to depict the Other, i.e., Berenice.

The Spectral and Supernatural Body

As spectralization and the otherness of women are results from the fragmentation that the Dark Ladies go through, their existence becomes strange, causing mistrust and fear in the narrators. As the ladies' fragmented descriptions create a distorted, incongruent portrait, they acquire spectral, terrifying characteristics, evoking supernatural beings, because they represent a threat to the narrators. Thus, after the women die, they come back to life as spirits with no physical body that haunt and possess in order to torment the narrators' lives.

As we have mentioned before, the depiction of the ladies as strange entities separates them from their bereaved lovers and from their own humanity too. In the tales, the women were seen as an Other, as an inessential being in the narrations. The quality of strange femininity the Dark Ladies possess, at the same time, confuses but fascinates the narrators. In order to keep the mystery alive, without involving themselves with the ladies' strangeness, the narrators objectify them to transform the women into objects to be contemplated but not interacted with. However, after the ladies get sick or die, that fascination soon turns to hate —in the case of Morella when her husband longs for her death—, and fear—in Berenice and Ligeia, as their sickness and deaths plagues the narrators' mind constantly. This obsession with what causes profound fear, suspending the narrators' minds is another instance of the sublime in the tales. The ladies are the sublime objects in the tales because they are a greater force before the eyes of the narrators, confusing with their superior beauty, intelligence and with an ambiguity that is terrifying.

The relationship between women and their strangeness and how it causes hatred and fear results in transforming them into supernatural beings, outside of the human sphere. As Mulvey-Roberts explains: "The demonisation of woman as succubus, harpy, witch and any number of supernatural beings has located the female outside nature and beyond the natural order of things" (106). These supernatural and strange properties or even characterizations are related to womanhood, because they are seen as a strange element to men. In the Dark Ladies tales, the women become a strange entity as they are objectified by their fragmented descriptions, distorting their body, in

a way that connects them to the supernatural or to something *beyond the natural* thanks to their vast knowledge and power of mind.

In the case of "Berenice", it is well known that she *apparently* dies of an illness. Nevertheless, before that, her personality changes since "the spirit of change swept over her, pervading her mind, her habits, and her character, and, in a manner the most subtle and terrible, *disturbing* even the identity of her person" (98, emphasis added). These changes are more palpable when she is ill, and for us a moral change is present, as it disturbs and scares the narrator since he sees a threat in the ill Berenice.

In "Ligeia", the title character's supernatural quality is related to her presence as a spirit that haunts the narrator and subsequently possesses his second wife, Lady Rowena. After her death, the bereaved narrator laments Ligeia's death, but soon remarries. However, the new bride falls ill and begins to have feverish visions of "unusual motions", and strange sounds in her bedchamber. Eventually the narrator started to feel a "palpable although invisible object" passing by him whenever he reminisced about Ligeia (121-2). Ligeia's haunting recalls what we have mentioned so far about the fragmentation and spectralization of her figure, now in a literal sense: Ligeia is not only a woman described in ethereal terms, after her death she becomes a specter that haunts the one who metaphorically butchered her.

Furthermore, Ligeia's spectralization takes a violent tone when she provokes the death of Rowena to later possess her body, in an action that shows Ligeia's

possessiveness over her husband. While the method in which Ligeia possesses Rowena is up to many interpretations, it is quite explicit that the Dark Lady shared her essence—her blood—with the woman: when Rowena takes a drink of water, the narrator sees "three or four large drops of a ruby colored fluid" fall into the goblet (122), which causes Rowena's death and Ligeia's revivification. Ligeia's act is violent as it stems from a possessive desire to compete with Rowena to take back her position as the narrator's wife, defying the limits between life and death.

In the case of Morella, her supernatural quality is highlighted by the power of her obscure knowledge, which grants her control over the narrator. It is supernatural because the narrator's description of her power of mind evokes the image of witchcraft, as if she were bewitching or unnaturally manipulating her husband: in the climax of the story, she predicts the moment of her own death and the events that will follow it, all this while cursing her husband to "days of sorrow" (107). One of the first features that arouses the narrator's suspicion is her voice "tainted with terror" which made him "shudder inwardly" (106). The erudite Morella begins to terrify the narrator when her words "oppress [him] as a spell" (106), further strengthening the association to witchcraft and the obscure. Williams explains that the concept of the witch is an attempt to vilify women who do not conform to patriarchal roles (91). In a way, Morella does not represent a submissive, dutiful wife, but rather an erudite, confident woman, superior to her husband, which may cause her vast knowledge to be misunderstood as terrifying.

Morella's alleged powers continue after her death, when she possibly transfers her own identity to her daughter: the child "grew *strangely* in stature and *intellect*, and was the perfect resemblance" (108, emphasis added) of Morella, adding an ambiguous, strange element as the girl starts to look strangely like an adult. The strange appearance of the child causes fear in the narrator as he "shuddered at its *too perfect identity*" (108, emphasis added). Later, the bizarre resemblance is resolved when the child dies, and Morella possesses her daughter's body.

In conclusion, we can state that there is a duality to the Dark Ladies spectralities: their transformation into an Other and their depiction as supernatural entities that horrify. First, the fragmented descriptions made by the male narrators resulted in the depiction of the ladies as ambiguous and strange to them, characteristics that lead to the spectralization of the women as they become a dehumanized, incorporeal Other to the narrators. Depicted as the Other, the ladies—who were previously objectified, butchered, distorted—, after dying become supernatural beings that scare the male narrators for the supernatural qualities they acquired in their depiction of butchered, strange beings.

Conclusion

In the Dark Ladies tales, “Berenice”, “Ligeia”, and “Morella”, the male narrators try to explain the strange, mysterious qualities of the title characters by highlighting their beautiful and extraordinary intelligence. However, the narration slowly unveils the strangeness that the women possess, made evident by the fragmented, objectified descriptions the narrators make of them. That strangeness produces a myriad of exacerbated emotions in the narrators—awe, idolatry, fear, obsession—which culminates in the distortion and erasure of the women’s agency and individuality, as they become specters, or ambiguous creatures in the end. All these elements define Berenice, Ligeia, and Morella as sublime objects to the male narrators, as they as beautiful, otherworldly women arise profound passions and emotions in their bereaved lovers.

This dissertation had both strengths and weaknesses. Regarding the former, this work followed the structure of the tales to address the most aspects possible; thus, we aimed to explore the entirety of the three stories and their main characters. Furthermore, our use of quotes from the primary texts was extensive, as we tried to present precise evidence in most of our arguments. Finally, we tried to use diverse secondary sources, going from philosophy, gender theory and literary theory regarding the gothic, in order to bring a varied point of view. Concerning the weaknesses, we perceive that this work could have some redundancies regarding concepts and examples from the primary texts. In the latter especially, this was because the tales were not lengthy enough to guarantee a diversity of scenes to analyze. Another

weakness we can address is that we could not link some arguments to all the three tales. In some interpretation we made some generalizations and excluded one of the stories so as to explain the main points that were a commonality in the other two.

In our writing process, we encountered several problems due to lack of time, accessibility to secondary sources or space in this dissertation. Firstly, it was difficult to explain some complex concepts such as *beauty*, the *sublime* or *the Other* so that they were clear enough for the readers. This same issue occurred while explaining the link between fragmentation and the Petrarchan tradition, a key relationship to the entirety of the dissertation. Secondly, there were difficulties with having access to some secondary and tertiary sources regarding specific ideas, topics, or interpretations of the tales, especially with "Morella", since we could not have access to articles or other secondary material that explored that tale comprehensively. Thirdly, due to the extension of this work and its limits of words, we could not explore in depth the idea of monstrosity linked to the female body, as it did not fit entirely in our interpretation of the texts. Another angle we could not explore in depth was that of a more feminist-leaning analysis because some key feminist concepts, while immensely interesting, did not fit into our vision of the tales; hence, we could not integrate it into our work. Additionally, in the scope of a feminist analysis too, it would have been interesting to have studied how the gender of the reader affects the interpretations of the text, that is to say, if the gender relations that occur in the tales have a different impact or interpretation depending on the gender of the reader.

While writing this dissertation, it was evident that the objectification of women in popular culture goes beyond sexualizing or invalidating them. Fundamentally, women are seen as a subject apart from male-centered society because their roles and bodies are slightly different from men. Therefore, women, as characters in a story, can easily become an object to be contemplated but not engaged with. They too can easily become something foreign and monstrous, even when society wants to admire and celebrate them.

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