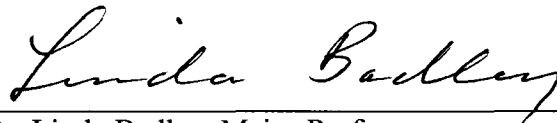


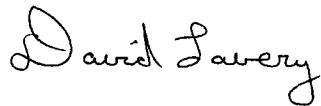
“Much of Madness, and More of Sin”: Vincent Price, Gender, and the Poe Cycle,
1960-1972

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**“Much of Madness, and More of Sin”: Vincent Price, Gender, and the Poe Cycle,
1960-1972**

Jonathan Malcolm Lampley

**A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Middle Tennessee State University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy Degree
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Abstract for

Much of Madness, More of Sin: Vincent Price, Gender, and the Poe Cycle, 1960-1972

by

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For generations of moviegoers, the name Vincent Price (1911-1993) remains synonymous with horror and suspense. Between 1960 and 1972, Vincent Price appeared in a series of thirteen Edgar Allan Poe adaptations for American International Pictures (AIP). Various articles in both popular and academic journals offer intriguing interpretations of specific films, but thematic analysis of Vincent Price's body of work is virtually non-existent. *Much of Madness, More of Sin: Vincent Price, Gender, and the Poe Film Cycle, 1960-1972* posits that the Poe cycle's depiction of women as villains, vixens, and objects of veneration, as well as Price's onscreen persona as a "camp" icon, challenged traditional gender norms during the sexual revolution of the 1960s.

This study, which is divided into ten chapters, explores the often ambivalent constructions of the cycle's male and female characterizations. At the same time, it argues that the films are not always "campy" in the sense of exaggerated self-mockery that other critics have claimed. In fact, the cycle demonstrates a surprising degree of fealty to the source material, implying both a fidelity to the spirit of Poe's output and an

acknowledgement of gender ambivalence in the writer's fiction and poetry that makes the films effective vehicles of adaptation.

Chapter I provides relevant biographical information on Price, Poe, and founding Poe cycle producer/director Roger Corman and discusses the theories of critics Judith Butler, Barbara Creed, and Harry M. Benshoff that inform the study. Chapters II through VII examine six Poe adaptations directed by Corman between 1960 and 1965, the films that influenced Price's public persona long after the series abandoned any direct connection to Poe's material and featured many examples of contradictory and even subversive gender performance. Chapter VIII analyzes *The Conqueror Worm* (1968) and traces the influence of this acclaimed film and director Michael Reeves on the remaining entries in the series, helmed by Gordon Hessler. Of particular interest is how this film positions Price as a misogynistic Puritan witch hunter, foreshadowing the later feminist reading of the witch trial phenomenon as a mass repression of emerging female independence. Chapter IX discusses six productions that exist outside the established Corman and Reeves/Hessler "universes" but still feature Price, referencing the actor's familiar persona while continuing to challenge traditional masculine and feminine roles. Chapter X concludes the study by enumerating thematic similarities, such as the lack of male offspring among Price's characters in the series and the reoccurring motif of the ambiguously gendered protagonists (both male and female), that link the various films into an organic and interrelated whole, suggesting an overarching worldview derived as much from the iconography of Poe as from the details of his output.

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Chapter I

“And Horror the Soul of the Plot”: Introduction

For generations of moviegoers, the name Vincent Price (1911-1993) remains synonymous with horror and suspense. Indeed, his reputation as the screen’s greatest bogeyman remains unchallenged by any performer to emerge since the actor’s prime; only Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi might realistically challenge Price for the title of greatest horror film star of all time, at least in terms of public consciousness, respect, and affection. Whether he was cast as the tortured or torturing (or sometimes both) protagonist in adaptations of Poe or as the scarred avenger in such classics as *House of Wax* (1953) and *The Abominable Dr. Phibes* (1971), Price’s mellifluous voice, powerful screen presence, and twinkling eyes (capable of conveying madness and humor in equal measure) thrilled audiences in his heyday and continue to fascinate fans years after his death and decades after his last significant horror performance. As Mark Clark points out, “Evil never looked so good. . . . Price wore screen villainy like an Armani suit” (90).

Between 1960 and 1972, Vincent Price appeared in a series of Edgar Allan Poe adaptations produced under the banner of American International Pictures—the independent production company for whom the actor made the vast majority of his horror films. In all, Price appeared in eleven feature films at least putatively based on Poe’s work for the company; he narrated *Spirits of the Dead* (1969), a European anthology boasting Poe stories as envisioned by arthouse favorites Roger Vadim, Federico Fellini, and Louis Malle that AIP distributed domestically; and finally he starred in *An Evening of Edgar Allan Poe*, a quartet of one-man readings AIP developed as a television special.

Over the course of a decade, then, Vincent Price and AIP collaborated on thirteen Poe-derived film and TV projects. While certain individual films such as *House of Wax* or *The Fly* may be more familiar “Vincent Price movies” in the minds of the general public, it is the now-legendary Poe series that really define the actor’s place in the history of horror cinema—“for better and for worse,” as Lucy Chase Williams puts it (164). Indeed, the Poe cycle earns the actor a unique distinction among fantasy specialists: other thespians may be recognized for multiple performances as monster *characters*—Bela Lugosi as Count Dracula, Peter Cushing as Baron Frankenstein—yet no major “horror star” portrayed his most famous *character* as often as Vincent Price interpreted onscreen the output of horror literature’s greatest *writer*.

Various articles and essays in both popular magazines and academic journals offer intriguing interpretations of specific films, but careful analysis of thematic issues in Vincent Price’s body of work is virtually non-existent. It is this lack of thematic surveys that has inspired this study. “*Much of Madness, and More of Sin*”: *Vincent Price, Gender, and the Poe Film Cycle, 1960-1972* is intended to partially fill the void that exists in both horror film scholarship and cinema studies in general. Doubtless many other themes could be identified and analyzed (and some of the most relevant are briefly mentioned here), but the role gender plays in the films merits particular attention.

The most fundamental justification for this study is that gendered characters appear in each movie as either protagonists or antagonists; frequently ambivalence about gender roles and expectations is the implicit engine that propels Price’s characters down the paths they pursue. Indeed, the actor’s somewhat effete manner—often a conscious or

subconscious dramatic allusion to his real-life persona—informs his characters, occasionally suggesting the exaggerated mannerisms associated with the term “camp.” Thus what Harry M. Benshoff identifies as a queer or “homo-horror approach” involving “a gay or lesbian film star (whether ‘actually’ homosexual or culturally perceived as such) [who] brings his/her persona to a horror film” (14) is useful. Ambivalence about Price’s private or public sexuality is incorporated into the psychological makeup of his characters, bringing questions of gender and sexual identity to bear on the analysis and interpretation of the films.

Female characters represent fundamental concerns that horror texts frequently explore. In addition to gender ambivalence, anxiety about sexuality, romantic love, and the ramifications of challenges to existing social and cultural paradigms inform the Price/Poe collaborations. According to Steven Thornton,

The AIP Poe films, made at the vanguard of [the women’s liberation movement], reflect the tensions of the times in their compulsive, manic-tinged gender battles recurring themes of premature burial, sexual repression, and passions from beyond the grave seem to reflect the frustrations of women whose voices in society were restricted by the social constraints of the time (207).

On the most fundamental level, the women in the Poe series are often horrific because their presence represents a transgression against the assumptions and protocols of the patriarchal communities in which the stories take place. As Barbara Creed points out in “Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection,”

In general terms, . . . abjection, as a source of horror, works within patriarchal societies as a means of separating the human from the non-human and the fully constituted subject from the partially formed subject. Ritual becomes a means by which societies both renew their initial contact with the abject element and then exclude that element. (36)

Women in the Poe series, ultimately, are barometers of the “dread of difference” analyzed in Barry Keith Grant’s 1996 study of gender and horror. Of course, there are instances where the fluidity of gender constructs among male characters equally suggests a similar dread of difference, often an internal component that drives the Price protagonists to distraction if not actual death.

Moreover, characters such as Madeline in *House of Usher* (1960) and Sarah in *The Conqueror Worm* (1968) contribute significantly to the films’ achievement of thematic fealty to the source material. Even when individual films substantially differ from the details of Poe’s fiction and poetry, they nevertheless convey an accurate impression of the author’s particular interest in romantic obsession, insanity, and the inevitability of death. This observation directly refutes the prevailing critical assessment of the series, which tends to emphasize the liberties taken with the details of Poe’s output without acknowledging the significant thematic connections between the films and the fiction.

Women in the Poe adaptations are variously depicted as villains, victims, and objects of veneration or some combination thereof, particularly among the female leads. As Barbara Creed observes, “all human societies have a conception of the monstrous-

is in their depiction of women that the AIP Poe adaptations illustrate the ambivalence towards the feminine that informed the mindset of many Cold War-era Americans, an ambivalence altered but not greatly different from the attitudes of the nineteenth century. While Poe himself treated women in his fiction as beings to be worshipped, his women, such as Ligeia and Madeline Usher, are often fearsome creatures. Interestingly, comparatively few of Poe's major female characters are clearly identified as victims, so the AIP films often create or modify females for Price to menace.

Frequently deemphasized in other horror film studies, the Poe series has been the subject of only one substantial article, Steven Thornton's "The Women of American International Pictures" (1996), a thoughtful piece undermined by its brevity and restricted coverage of only five films. Don G. Smith's *The Poe Cinema* (1999) is more comprehensive, but Smith discusses all cinematic adaptations of Poe, thus limiting the space available to cover the Price films. Although Ken Gelder worries that "close readings of specific horror texts" raises the question, "how much significance can horror take?" (6), an area so rarely explored in depth as the AIP Poe series can surely survive an inquiry into its meaning and relevance without growing stale.

Considerable scholarship has been devoted to gender and sexuality in horror movies; however, the majority of these studies center on women in horror films of the so-called Modern Age (roughly the mid-1970s to the present). Innovative books such as Carol Clover's *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (1992) are by chronological definition unconcerned with Price's films. It seems the roles of women as victims (and sometimes as victimizers) in "slasher films" have proven more

intriguing to academic writers. Issues of gender and sexuality in the classics of horror cinema's Golden Age (roughly 1931-1948) have been explored in Rhonda J. Berenstein's *Attack of the Leading Ladies* (1996) and elsewhere, but such studies again omit Price's significant horror movies. Ultimately the tendency of critics to focus on the early and late periods of horror film production reveals a critical void that beckons for additional interpretation and analysis of movies made during what might best be described as the Silver Age of Horror Cinema (roughly 1957-1973), the era chiefly associated with American International's Poe/Price efforts in this country and England's Hammer Film's Gothic remakes.

Given Vincent Price's popularity, it is unsurprising that he has been the subject of many relatively brief profiles before and after his death. However, full-length studies of his life and work have been less common. Price himself authored or edited several books, including works on cooking and art, but none of these have much to say about his horror films (indeed, some of these books were conceived specifically to refute his spooky public image). Price completed two volumes of memoirs—*I Like What I Know* (1959), which covered his “adventures in art,” and *The Book of Joe* (1962), which discussed a favorite dog and was filled “with delightful anecdotes concerning other household pets” (Parish and Whitney 259)—yet neither book provides much insight into the actor's sinister performances, most of which were not committed to film when these semi-autobiographical works were published. The actor penned a short autobiography aimed at younger readers titled *Vincent Price: His Movies, His Plays, His Life* (1978), but the book's brevity and juvenile focus render it practically useless as a critical source.

Frankly, it appears that the actor was very reluctant to take his horror films as seriously as his fans and critics do. It has therefore fallen to other parties to produce full-length examinations of Price's cinematic career.

James Robert Parish and Steven Whitney published *Vincent Price Unmasked* in 1974, the only major biography to appear during the actor's life. Although this volume provides excellent factual information about its subject and is profusely illustrated, it is insubstantial as a critical study of Price's professional output, possibly because the authors were such devoted fans of his work. Lucy Chase Williams' *The Complete Films of Vincent Price* (1995) is more comprehensive, but it remains more biographical and factual than interpretive and analytical. Williams devotes more or less equal coverage to each production, an approach which is beneficial in the sense that it exposes readers to Price's lesser-known films, especially his non-genre output; however, such an all-purpose survey necessarily diminishes the opportunities to examine individual trends and themes in Price's films. Price befriended Williams, a fellow Yale alum, so her work is unabashedly prejudiced, limiting objective criticism of his performances. *Vincent Price: A Daughter's Biography* (1999) by Victoria Price is the most carefully researched and insightful account of the actor's life, yet the biographer freely admits her relative distaste for her father's horror films. As a result, she minimizes her discussion of Price's most significant professional legacy and allows numerous factual errors to undermine her study.

Denis Meikle's *Vincent Price: The Art of Fear* (2003) is the latest full-length survey of Price's career to appear in print. An insightful critic capable of making

Denis Meikle's *Vincent Price: The Art of Fear* (2003) is the latest full-length survey of Price's career to appear in print. An insightful critic capable of making thoughtful observations about the actor's horror and mystery films, Meikle often brilliantly incorporates material published by earlier writers and unearths a multitude of rare and unusual publicity materials to illustrate his book. Nevertheless, Meikle unevenly distributes the weight of his critical observations; certain key films receive much less attention than they deserve, while some minor productions are covered in far greater detail than they warrant. Although more focused than previous surveys of Price's work, and particularly attentive to the Poe adaptations, Meikle's book is still too general to offer the close reading of individual films and themes that Price's output requires.

Vincent Price's Gothic productions are well served by insightful chapters in John Brosnan's *The Horror People* (1976) and Mark Clark's *Smirk, Sneer, and Scream: Great Acting in Horror Cinema* (2004), but by definition such broad works must cover other performers besides Price, thereby diverting their attention from the Poe films. *Vincent Price* (1998), edited by Gary J. and Susan Svelha, contains several insightful essays on individual films, especially the ones derived from Poe, but the book omits several titles and includes pieces that are more descriptive than analytical in nature. Furthermore, the fact that various authors cover individual films precludes the possibility of incorporating a single thesis or general approach to a consideration of the actor or the series.

Biographical documentaries such as the Arts and Entertainment Network's 1993 episode of *Biography* devoted to the actor are amusing but ultimately too shallow to be of much critical value. Price himself put little stock in such biographical projects, as suggested by

his comment that “the revelation of people’s personal life, unless it has to do with their art, to be boring. When [biographies] have to do with people’s art, then they’re interesting” (qtd. in Svelha and Svelha, *Vincent*, back cover). All of the general studies, however, offer a framework of facts and dates upon which any serious investigation of the actor’s career must rely.

The actor who “could bring an arch elegance to even the most insipid goings-on” (Skal, *Horror* 257) was born Vincent Leonard Price, Junior in St. Louis, Missouri, on May 27th, 1911, the youngest of four children born to Vincent Leonard and Marguerite Willcox Price. The family was, according to the actor, “well-to-do, not rich enough to evoke envy but successful enough to demand respect” (qtd. in Price 5). Price’s father was president of the National Candy Company whose associates presented him with a plaque commemorating the birth of “the Candy Kid” on the day baby Vincent was born (Parrish and Whitney 1).

After graduating from Yale University in 1933, Price taught briefly before enrolling at the Courtauld Institute of the University of London, a prestigious art school. Given the direction into horror and fantasy that his acting career would take, it is interesting that the young art lover met Florence Stoker, widow of the author of *Dracula*, during this time (Skal, *Hollywood* 232). While in England, Price decided to pursue an acting career after successful performances in *Chicago* and *Victoria Regina*. American theatrical work followed, and in 1938 Price made his cinematic debut as the romantic lead in a screwball comedy, *Service De Luxe*. Price appeared in costume dramas, historical epics, and war pictures early in his career; roles in *Tower of London* (1939,

opposite Boris Karloff) and *The Invisible Man Returns* (1940) foreshadowed the Gothic nature of his later productions.

Price's turn as a suave rake in *Laura* (1944), which remained "the best film he ever made" (Price 117), demonstrates the combination of the sensual and the sinister that made him ideal for Gothic horror productions. As the fiancée of the title character (Gene Tierney), the tall and handsome Shelby Carpenter, Price was perfectly cast as a charming but ultimately unfaithful lover who turns to an older woman (Judith Anderson) for emotional and financial support when his duplicity is uncovered. Twice more the actor would be paired with Tierney (earlier both actors had performed small roles in *Hudson's Bay*, 1941): in *Leave Her to Heaven* (1945) Price plays the jilted lover of Tierney's psychotic murderess, and in *Dragonwyck* (1946) Price's drug-addled lord of the manor marries, then attempts to kill, Tierney's innocent heroine. These final pairings with Gene Tierney, with their emphasis on mental instability and Gothic iconography, provide almost a blueprint for the Poe films, for they each cast the actor as a more or less unstable love interest who is ultimately rejected by the Tierney character and involve a degree of sexual/romantic obsession and conflict. *Shock* (1946), Price's first top-billed screen role (Parish and Whitney 63), cemented the actor's villainous onscreen persona as a murderous psychiatrist urged to mayhem by his lovestruck mistress. This plot device alludes to the greed and ambition of Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare's play, and like Macbeth, *Shock* offers a female protagonist who takes on masculine traits of aggression while the male protagonist retreats to a submissive, feminine role as the somewhat reluctant instrument of his female partner's will.

House of Wax (1953), whose novel 3-D effects helped sell millions of tickets worldwide (counting revivals and taking inflation into consideration, it is probably Price's most financially successful feature), was a throwback to the sort of classic horror films popularized by the likes of Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi; *The Fly* (1958) was another enormous hit (although for once Price plays a sympathetic supporting character, not the titular monster). These titles are generally cited as the most popular and best-remembered of Price's horror films. Although the actor continued to appear in non-genre films like *The Ten Commandments* (1956), his status as a horror star was fixed by the early 1960s thanks to his performances in *House on Haunted Hill* (1958) and *The Tingler* (1959) for William Castle and, especially, the cycle of Poe adaptations directed by Roger Corman, beginning with *House of Usher*.

Price continued to work even after the Poe series ground to a halt. He experienced a late-career renaissance in a series of darkly humorous revenge thrillers initiated by *The Abominable Dr. Phibes* (1971), which Rick Worland identifies as "an effective horror thriller and self-conscious play on Price's dual personae" as horror star and aesthete (32), and its sequel, *Dr. Phibes Rises Again!* (1972). The campy style of these films lends itself to a "queer" reading (in both the sexual and alien/Other senses) and suggests the same sort of gender ambivalence found in the Poe series (which was the primary inspiration for the Phibes films in the first place). Harry M. Benshoff identifies *Phibes* (and theoretically its sequel) as "a genre-queering opus" intended "to invoke adulation of the clever mad doctor rather than pity for his victims" while implying sexual

Although the Phibes character is clearly established as heterosexual via his devotion to his dead wife, his over-the-top methods of eliminating enemies, often incorporating ridiculously impractical Rube Goldberg inventions, imbue the films with a camp sensibility. Furthermore, Dr. Phibes is a sort of Edwardian cyborg, with much of the tissue and organs destroyed in a fiery car crash replaced with artificial prosthetics. As a result, Phibes is “prototypically queer in that he possesses no naturalized physical body” (Benshoff 211). Thus notions of ambiguous gender are tied to anxiety about the subversion of physical identity—an anxiety addressed in several of the Poe films and the Lovecraft-based, Poe-titled Corman production *The Haunted Palace* (1963).

The highlight of what can be grouped as Poe’s “Revenge Cycle” is *Theatre of Blood* (1973), which features an all-star supporting cast of British stage luminaries and became the actor’s favorite experience among his horror productions (Price 279). Interestingly, *Theatre of Blood* is the one film in the series where Price’s character, here flamboyantly named Edward Lionheart, directly alludes to homosexual queerness. Lionheart disguises himself as a stereotypically gay hairdresser in order to murder drama critic Chloe Moon (Coral Browne, whom Price eventually married). Lionheart later kills homosexual critic Meredith Merridew (Robert Moreley) by choking the victim with a pastry consisting of Merridew’s cooked dogs (his “babies,” as he calls them earlier in the film) in a wry reference to the “Queen” from Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*. Like Dr. Phibes before him, Lionheart commits his murders with the aid of a beautiful female assistant with whom he maintains a strictly platonic relationship; in Lionheart’s case, his assistant is his own daughter, who disguises herself as a young man. Thus the blurring of

assistant with whom he maintains a strictly platonic relationship; in Lionheart's case, his assistant is his own daughter, who disguises herself as a young man. Thus the blurring of gender and identity boundaries that is largely subtextual in the Poe series is more literally manifested in the Revenge Cycle, particularly *Theatre of Blood*.

Unfortunately the next film in the cycle, *Madhouse* (1974), failed with critics and audiences alike. It's a shameful waste not only of Price's talents but also those of fellow horror veterans Peter Cushing and Robert Quarry, all of whom are trapped in a confusing, illogical, slow-moving production that bungles an opportunity to engage in meaningful self-reflexivity. Price plays a variation of his screen persona, an aging horror star named Paul Toombs; clips from old AIP Price films represent Toombs' past glories. Very loosely adapting Angus Hall's novel *Devilday*, director Jim Clark almost completely eschews the source material in order to craft what could have been to Gothic horror films what *Sunset Blvd.* is to silent movies—a combination of parody and affection for the stars and iconography of an increasingly obsolete cinema aesthetic. *Madhouse* does suggest a queer connection between Toombs and screenwriter Herbert Flay (Cushing), who together “created” Toombs' cinematic persona, Dr. Death; their creation of an alien/Other persona metaphorically recalls the Frankenstein mythos and its images of non-female reproductivity. Flay seeks to assume the Dr. Death mantle himself, but he is killed in a fight with Toombs, who in turn takes on Flay's identity, ultimately resulting in a character who is an unstable compound of three separate identities. Alas, these potentially fascinating explorations of gender and identity fluidity, contextualized by the interaction of two major horror personas, are largely ignored. In the final analysis, the

film fails to develop fully “the postmodernist urge to conflate reality and the image” (Benshoff 219). Disgusted by the increasingly shabby nature of his vehicles, Price abandoned AIP after *Madhouse*, an ignoble end to his fourteen-year association with the company.

The Revenge Cycle films remain among the most popular and respected of the actor’s cinematic legacy, in part due to their foregrounding in his screen persona. In particular, *Theatre of Blood* “is an exceptionally entertaining film, and one that uses Shakespearean materials abundantly, with style and ingenuity, and . . . with respect but no reverence” (Pendleton 145). Unfortunately, fatigue began to set in, as the actor explained to Stanley Wiater:

I was sent some scripts. But the last ones I [made], . . . like *Theatre of Blood* . . . or the Dr. Phibes films, were send-ups. So everything that was sent to me after that were exactly the same story. Done in a different way or with a different plot, maybe, but significantly the same story. Or they were overly violent . . . so I didn’t do them. (131)

Price eschewed horror parts completely, resulting in a five-year absence from the screen (television, the stage, and the lecture circuit kept him profitably employed, however).

After winning critical approval for *The Great Mouse Detective* (1986) and *The Whales of August* (1987), Price gave final feature performance, as the eccentric but gentle inventor of *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), for director Tim Burton, a young fan inspired to make fantasy-themed movies partially by Price’s Gothic thrillers. Worn down by age and

Vincent Price's cinematic reputation enabled him to develop a public persona that resulted in a one-man cottage industry of ghoulish profitability; the actor delivered spoken word performances of Poe for record companies, shilled numerous household products in television commercials, and lent his sardonic image to children's toys and games. Having already endeared himself to rock fans by appearing on Alice Cooper's 1975 album *Welcome to My Nightmare*, Price further cemented his standing among a new generation of admirers by performing a sort of Gothic rap on Michael Jackson's *Thriller* (1983), one of the best-selling records of all time. Other rock bands, including ZZ Top and The Misfits, would pay homage to the actor during their careers; key works by such innovators as Alan Parsons and Lou Reed, while specifically concerned with Poe's fiction and poetry, nevertheless were composed with an awareness of Price's Poe-inspired movies.

Price's lifelong interest in the visual arts and gourmet cooking allowed him to show a different side of his personality when he lectured and demonstrated his expertise in person and on talk shows. As Rick Worland has pointed out, Price "cultivated the image of a cosmopolitan teacher of art appreciation and gourmet cuisine made accessible to the masses" (22). Price's real-life status as a Renaissance man ultimately informs his onscreen persona, and vice versa; as a result, the actor has become an ambiguous figure in popular culture, a sort of Santa Claus of shudders whose impressive offscreen accomplishments somehow contradict his villainous image while simultaneously contributing to it by associating education and refinement with mental and emotional abnormality.

contributing to it by associating education and refinement with mental and emotional abnormality.

The idea for a series of Poe adaptations originated with independent filmmaker Roger Corman, American International's most prolific producer during the 1950s who was so adept at making films quickly and cheaply that "if anyone can be said to have kept drive-in pictures in business in the late 1950s, and early 1960s, it was Corman" (Lampley, Beck, and Clark 231). Born in Detroit on April 5th, 1926, Corman grew up in Los Angeles. In 1954, Corman co-wrote and helped produce his first film, *Highway Dragnet*, for Allied Artists; produced his first science fiction film, *The Monster from the Ocean Floor*, for distributor Robert Lippert; and finally co-wrote and produced *The Fast and the Furious* for a newly formed production company, American Releasing Corporation, which shortly became American International Pictures. Although Corman would never produce exclusively for AIP, the company would distribute his most famous—in some cases, perhaps, infamous—low-budget projects, including such archetypal titles as *It Conquered the World* (1956), *A Bucket of Blood* (1959), and *The Little Shop of Horrors* (1960), the latter probably the most famous of Corman's cult films and the inspiration for the popular 1982 stage musical, itself filmed in 1986.

After *House of Usher* in 1960, Corman found himself at the helm of eight more Gothic horror films, most of which were inspired, directly or indirectly, by the works of Poe. Tiring of period horror films, the filmmaker explored the world of motorcycle gangs with *The Wild Angels* (1966) and shot a key drama about the counterculture, *The Trip* (1967), both for AIP. Corman's most elaborate and expensive film, *The St.*

Valentine's Day Massacre (1967), which Gary Morris praises as one of the director's "most controlled, resonant productions" that works "both as a straight, 'torn-from-the-headlines' gangster film, and as a highly stylized philosophical drama that casts Fate as alternately indifferent and malign" (57), was distributed by 20th Century-Fox, one of Hollywood's oldest and most prestigious studios.

By this time, the specialist was beginning to enjoy serious critical attention, particularly from European critics. He began his career with no significant technical training or experience, literally learning how to make his frugal movies on the job. With each project, Corman improved his understanding of film language and eventually became adept at devising interesting angles, such as placing his camera inside a fireplace in *The Haunted Palace* or shooting from within an open grave in *The Premature Burial*, which allowed him to achieve impressive visual and stylistic flourishes on a fraction of the budgets allotted to typical Hollywood projects.

The repetition of Poesque and Freudian themes, plus his continued fascination with misfits and rebels, so impressed critics at the 1970 Edinburgh Film Festival that a full-length appreciation—*Roger Corman: The Millenic Vision*—followed; according to Gary Morris, the monograph is "unquestionably the most important and substantial criticism of Corman in English" (153). The director eventually developed his own theories of filmmaking, derived largely from the *auteur* theory and informed by his legendary thriftiness:

On most films, the director is the dominant creative force. But it is not always that way . . . More times than the critics think, the most important person is the

producer. Sometimes the most important person is the writer, and occasionally, the most important person will be the star. But, in general, the most dominant creative force is the director. (qtd. in Wiater 46)

While Corman unquestionably practices his *auteur* theories in the Poe cycle, he and his screenwriters also tailor the protagonists to fit Price's onscreen persona. Although the notion that these characters are tortured and haunted by lost love, encroaching madness, and the weight of family history is derived from Poe and fine-tuned by Corman, each of these characters remains intelligent, articulate, and more or less artistic and aesthetically aware. Their sophistication and charm ironically underscore their eventual descent into insanity and malevolence. These traits are all derived from Price's public image as an aesthete, which is why he was Corman's first (and apparently only) choice to play Roderick Usher and, ultimately, the other leads in the series (Smith 107).

Corman left AIP for good in 1970 and decided to start his own distributing firm. Under the aegis of New World Pictures, the freshly minted mogul approved and financed exploitation fare for the drive-in circuit. Corman sold New World in 1983 for a reported 16.5 million dollars (Gray 155); soon, however, he set up yet another company, Concorde-New Horizons Pictures. In 1990, he briefly returned to the director's chair for *Frankenstein Unbound*, based on the science fiction novel by Brian Aldiss; the film's box office failure, coupled with advancing age, convinced "the King of the B's" to retire from directing for good.

If Roger Corman had never made a single Poe film, his standing as a director would be confirmed by *The Little Shop of Horrors*, *The St. Valentine's Day Massacre*,

relations that failed to find popular or critical favor at the time of its release—and whose failure became “the biggest disappointment of [his] career” (Corman 103). His ability to make coherent films cheaply and quickly set a standard that independent filmmakers continue to emulate. Yet Corman’s greatest contribution to motion pictures may be his legendary “unofficial film school.” Such actors as Jack Nicholson, Bruce Dern, Peter Fonda, and Pam Grier earned early credits on Corman projects. Significant directors, including Francis Ford Coppola, Peter Bogdanovich, Martin Scorsese, Ron Howard, and James Cameron, worked for Corman in the infancy of their careers. Roger Corman is less important as an exploiter of popular tastes than as a symbol of the independent filmmaker and as the mentor for three generations of younger creators who have gone on to outpace him in terms of both commercial and critical significance. There seems little doubt that Corman’s career and influence disproves the prediction his former employer, Samuel Z. Arkoff, made in 1970: “When you come right down to it, I don’t think there are any of us in the film industry who are making anything today that will be of more than passing historical interest fifty years from now” (qtd. in Brosnan 135).

Founded in 1954, American International Pictures was the brainchild of Samuel Z. Arkoff and James H. Nicholson, film distributors who realized that a fortune could be made by producing “cheaper genre films” for “independent theater owners, in particular drive-in operators” (Price 210). Teenagers made up most of the market for AIP releases; according to David J. Skal, nearly three quarters of the moviegoing public was between the ages of twelve and twenty-five by 1958 (*Horror* 255). The Poe adaptations are rivaled in popular familiarity only by the series of teen romantic comedies initiated in

1963 with *Beach Party*, but the sheer number of youth-oriented films AIP produced or distributed before the company's dissolution in 1979 is remarkable. The relevance of AIP is particularly notable given the number of personnel who influenced popular cinema (and as a result, popular assumptions about gender, sex roles, and social issues) during the Cold War through the company's output—and who in many cases continue to inform popular culture today.

Almost all of the AIP films refer to gender and sexual conflict, often for comic effect. As a result, AIP releases—particularly those helmed by Corman—serve as a sort of barometer measuring changes in the sex roles in American society. Thus archetypical depictions of males as intrepid young heroes give way to more complicated visions of men as ambivalent protagonists, “bad boys” who threaten the status quo because of their disregard for societal norms, including traditional paradigms of gender and sexuality. Similarly, female roles evolve from stock characters—such as the virginal heroine or the trappy “vamp”—reflective of postwar gender assumptions into more rounded characters whose complexity indicates the sometimes radical reconception of womanhood that emerged in the 1960s.

The Price-Corman-AIP collaboration required a deep wellspring of inspiration, which the poems and short stories of Edgar Allan Poe provided in abundance. “Horror, despair, and the ever-present gaping of the grave” informed Poe's life and works (Bloom 12). Born on January 19, 1809, to itinerant actors then residing in Boston, Edgar Poe was orphaned by the age of three and taken in by John and Francis Allan of Richmond. After his foster mother died, Poe was cut out of Allan's will, leaving the youthful author in

almost unrelenting poverty for the rest of his life. Over the years, Poe edited such distinguished publications as the *Southern Literary Messenger* and *Graham's Literary Magazine*. Poe's most important poem, "The Raven," appeared in 1845, earning the critical and popular renown that continues to this day. Yet the poem's notoriety brought no financial security, and the Poes struggled to survive. Tuberculosis struck his wife (and cousin), Virginia, killing her in 1847. Crushed, Poe alleviated his pain with alcohol, laudanum, and attempts to woo other women. In October of 1849, a disheveled Poe was discovered unconscious in a Baltimore alley; he died on the 7th after uttering his last words: "Lord, help my poor soul!" (qtd. in Bloom 14).

Poe is remembered for inventing the detective story with "Murders in the Rue Morgue" and crafting satirical pieces and nonfiction articles in addition to his fiction and poetry. His critical theories, best expressed in "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846) and "Rationale of Verse" (1848), remain standard models for the assessment of literature. In "The Poetic Principle," published posthumously in 1850, Poe claimed that the love of a woman "is unquestionably the purest and truest of all poetical themes" (906), an intensely Romantic notion that is incorporated into many of the films adapted from his work. Ultimately, however, "Poe's greatest literary achievement was his renovation of the terror tale . . . into what has been recognized as some of the most sophisticated creations in psychological fiction in the English language" (Fisher 78). The eminent critic Harold Bloom provides perhaps the best assessment of the author and his works:

Chivalrous toward women, courteous and charming when not in his cups,
brilliant in his work, yet one of the most deeply tormented figures of

Chivalrous toward women, courteous and charming when not in his cups, brilliant in his work, yet one of the most deeply tormented figures of American literature, Edgar Allan Poe blazed darkly through life. He became a major influence on the French Symbolists . . . His effect upon American writers is incalculable . . . His stories, far from haunting us with the unknown, bring us face to face with our own devils, and through our terror we come to see a powerful, frightening side of our own consciousness. (14)

Edgar Allan Poe certainly ranks high on the list of literary figures who have become integrated into popular culture, as Mark Neimeyer has demonstrated with his discussion of the T-shirts, mouse pads, coffee cups, football team and Navy minesweeper that have been named in honor of or allusion to Poe (205-206). However, it is the cinema that “is the single most significant medium to have exploited Poe” (Neimeyer 216), especially those movies in which Vincent Price appeared. Brooding, brilliant, and artistic yet inevitably unhinged by madness and obsession, Price’s Poe-derived characters became his stock in trade. While the actor demonstrated his versatility on television and in non-horror features, the Poesque protagonist inevitably seemed to inform his popular persona—even after the films were reduced to borrowing Poe’s titles and little else, a development that especially irked their star, according to Lucy Chase Williams (218).

This study is divided into ten chapters. It demonstrates that while questions of gender identification and sexuality are relevant to the Poe series, the films themselves are not usually “campy” in the sense of exaggerated self-mockery that other observers have

claimed. Furthermore, issues associated with sexuality, such as the number and sex of offspring, are clues that suggest the degree to which Price's characters are misaligned with conventional assumptions about gender. The study also demonstrates a surprising degree of fealty to the source material, implying both a fidelity to the spirit of Poe's output and an acknowledgement of the presence of gender ambivalence in the writer's fiction and poetry that make the films particularly effective vehicles of adaptation.

Chapters II through VII examine the six Poe adaptations directed by Roger Corman and starring Price between 1960 and 1965. Among Price's most notable cinematic achievements, the cycle of Poe adaptations continued to influence his public persona long after the series abandoned any direct connection to Poe's material, particularly in the portrayal of female characters. The films are derived from the following works: "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Pit and the Pendulum," "The Raven," "Morella," "The Black Cat" (combined with "The Cask of Amontillado"), "The Case of M. Valdemar" (the foregoing four stories make up the constituent episodes of *Tales of Terror*, 1962), "The Masque of the Red Death" (which incorporates "Hop-Frog"), and "Ligeia." Of these ten tales, six feature female characters, but the adaptations of these all-male works incorporate women.

"The Fall of the House of Usher" is concerned with Madeline Usher, whose brother venerates her and victimizes her (by burying her alive) but also idealizes his sister; this complexity is well incorporated into the 1960 production titled *House of Usher*. Poe's most familiar work, "The Raven," features the most unambiguous attitude towards a woman in any of these tales; the speaker clearly adores his lost Lenore.

an agent of villainy, with emphasis on the latter. Both “Morella” and “Ligeia” are venerated and feared in roughly equal measure, while the nameless wife in “The Black Cat” and the tiny dancer Tripetta in “Hop-Frog” are clearly victims (although Tripetta is mistreated by the king, she is adored by Hop-Frog”).

After a brief lull, AIP restarted the Poe franchise with a group of four films based very loosely on the author’s output. Chapter VIII analyzes *The Conqueror Worm* (1968), perhaps the most critically acclaimed of all the Poe-influenced productions and traces the influence of this film and its director, Michael Reeves, on the remaining entries in the series, all of which were helmed by Gordon Hessler. Chapter IX discusses six Poe-derived productions that exist outside the Corman and Reeves/Hessler “universe” but still feature Price; *Twice-Told Tales*, based on the stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne, is also included in Chapter IX because it borrows Price and demonstrates obvious borrowings from the Poe series it blatantly imitates, as does Hessler’s *Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1971), which is also included in this chapter.

For the purposes of this study, the critical models presented by such feminist and gender studies theorists as Judith Butler, Barbara Creed, Harry M. Benshoff, and Laura Mulvey have been applied to the films discussed. Because her *Gender Trouble* (1990) has been so influential in establishing the theory of gender as a performative act, Butler is a crucial theorist to incorporate into any study of sexuality and gender. Similarly, Creed’s theories of abjection as applied to the “monstrous-feminine,” which are essential to examinations of gender in modern horror films, can also be useful tools in the analysis of the earlier style exemplified by Vincent Price’s output. Benshoff’s exploration of the

of the earlier style exemplified by Vincent Price's output. Benshoff's exploration of the relationship between horror and homosexuality (actual or implied) in the cinema undergirds the concept of transgressive sexualities and identities. Mulvey's exploration of the gendered gaze in narrative cinema is another fundamental theory that has not hitherto been applied to the Poe cycle.

The term "Gothic" refers to the classic iconography of Gothic literature and horror films, including such elements as aristocratic antagonists, innocent/virginal female victims, and the incorporation of dark castles, graveyards, and preternatural manifestations. Each of the films includes some or all of the traditional Gothic trappings, echoing their presence in the source material. Like much of Poe's fiction, many of the films included here do not feature actual supernatural demonstrations, but all more or less fit the definition of "the fantastic" offered by Tzvetan Todorov. Three conditions must be met, according to Todorov; the most important of these is the establishment of "the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described" (19). Furthermore, it is assumed that any production that incorporates supernatural iconography or other elements of the Gothic and emphasizes Vincent Price's participation is in fact a "horror film." Any film promoted as a Poe adaptation, no matter how tenuous, is considered part of the AIP series initiated in 1960. Finally, it is assumed that Price's characters are the protagonists of the films unless specifically identified otherwise.

Chapter II

“A History of Savage Degradations”: *House of Usher* (1960)

Vincent Price’s series of Poe-based movies started with *House of Usher* (1960), “one of the best Gothic horror films America has ever made” (McCarty 57). By the end of the 1950s, Roger Corman was ready to do something different from the cheap fare James H. Nicholson and Samuel Z. Arkoff had hitherto marketed. When AIP offered him \$200,000 to make two more cheap thrillers, Corman countered with a proposition for something new:

A longtime admirer of the works of Edgar Allan Poe, Corman envisioned a lavish Gothic adaptation in rich color and widescreen Not only were the author’s works in the public domain, but their exploitation possibilities and Corman’s reputation for turning a modest investment into box-office gold were an irresistible mixture. By the time the negotiations were completed, Corman had scored CinemaScope, color, and a \$270,000 budget. (Nollen 139)

Choosing his childhood favorite Poe tale, “The Fall of the House of Usher,” Corman began developing the project he would both produce and direct. Veteran science fiction writer Richard Matheson (1923-) penned the script, which he later claimed was “pure Poe” and the best of the series that eventually developed (qtd. in Brosnan 128). Now hailed as “dean emeritus of American fantasists” (Lampley, Beck, and Clark 228), Richard Matheson won early acclaim for his novels *I Am Legend* (1954) and *The*

Shrinking Man (1956), the latter of which he adapted for Universal in 1957; eventually he adapted the vampire-laden *I Am Legend* for AIP as *The Last Man on Earth*, with Vincent Price as the lead. By the time Matheson began his association with Corman and AIP, he was well on his way to becoming the most important author of science fiction and horror scripts of the 1960s.

Whatever Matheson contributed to the screenplay, ultimately *House of Usher* (the abbreviated release title, although some publicity materials and prints of the film are titled *The Fall of the House of Usher*; many of Corman's Gothic productions feature similar variant titles) is primarily the artistic vision of Roger Corman, whose Freudian reading of Poe's story dictated the visual and psychological style of the film:

The house can be seen as a woman's body with its openings—windows, doors, arches The corridor becomes a woman's vagina. The deeper you go into the dark hallways, then, the deeper you are delving into, say, an adolescent boy's first sexual stirrings. These are contradictory urges—an irresistible attraction and desire for sex and the fear of the unknown and illicit Put together correctly, the classic horror sequence is the equivalent of the sexual act. (Corman 80)

Corman also uses the house and the forlorn, blasted grounds that surround it as a symbol of what he terms protagonist Roderick Usher's "fevered and deranged mind" (81). Similarly, Corman followed the Gothic tradition of utilizing an old house or "haunted castle" to establish "an atmosphere conducive to the anxieties in the protagonist and . . . other characters in general" (Fisher 75). The film benefits immensely from the

crumbling house of horrors “luridly visualized” by Roger Corman (Kendrick 7). As a result of these symbolic underpinnings, *House of Usher* literalizes a madman’s disordered psyche, twisted and tormented by his perverse attraction/repulsion toward his own sister, Madeline (Myrna Fahey). To achieve this effect, Corman deliberately eschewed natural light and realistic sets, confining his production almost exclusively to studio soundstages. The film’s only location footage, shot amid the aftermath of a forest fire in Los Angeles’ Griffith Park (according to Corman’s DVD commentary), provides the scarred earth and devastated trees necessary to convey the “singularly dreary tract of country” and “sense of insufferable gloom” described by Poe (231) and representative of Roderick’s mental condition.

Complementing these physical production decisions is a significant shift in focus and motivation. Corman and Matheson completely alter the reason why nominal hero Philip Winthrop (Mark Damon)—the unnamed narrator of Poe’s original story—has come to the house of Usher. Roderick summons his childhood friend “with a view of attempting, by the cheerfulness of [his] society, some alleviation of [Roderick’s] malady” (Poe 232). The narrator is surprised to discover his mysterious host has a sister, the terminally ill Madeline. Yet in the film it is *Madeline* whom Philip has come to see, not Roderick. Philip explains that he met and fell in love with Madeline during her visit to Boston at some recent point, and he intends to marry her and take her away from her ancestral home.

Roderick initially refuses to allow Philip to see Madeline, claiming she is too ill for visitors. Soon, however, it is revealed that Roderick believes his family to be cursed;

Roderick initially refuses to allow Philip to see Madeline, claiming she is too ill for visitors. Soon, however, it is revealed that Roderick believes his family to be cursed; he wants the Usher line to die out, and the notion of his sister marrying and producing children terrifies him. “If you knew the nightmare you were picturing for me, sir,” Roderick mutters sadly. Of course Philip cannot bring himself to believe his beloved is anything but the lively, beautiful girl he fell in love with—even when he finally reunites with Madeline, who is almost as pale and eccentric as her brother.

Although Roderick mentions “the Usher curse” as the source of his family’s misfortune, there does not seem to be a truly supernatural cause; a more scientific, if no less sensational, explanation is offered: the Ushers suffer from hereditary insanity. “Three-fourths go mad,” Roderick explains while guiding Philip through a bizarre family portrait gallery (the incongruously abstract paintings were provided by avant-garde artist Burt Schoenberg) depicting the various murderers, thieves, harlots, and “merchants of flesh” from whom Roderick and Madeline have descended. Here Corman and Matheson once again depart sharply from Poe, who notes the Ushers have always distinguished themselves through “a peculiar sensibility of temperament, displaying itself . . . in many works of exalted art, and . . . repeated deeds of munificent yet unobtrusive charity” (232).

In any case, it quickly becomes obvious that Roderick’s objections to his sister’s marriage are not entirely based on the family’s haunted past. Roderick’s love for his sister exceeds the normal familial limits; initially depicted as more paternal than fraternal, Roderick’s concern for Madeline is really a psychosexual obsession. The suggestion of an excessive intimacy between Roderick and Madeline is more explicit than Poe’s; the

screenplay further underscores the ambivalence of Roderick's strange compound of brotherly concern and forbidden desire for Madeline and the consequences of an incestuous union, associating his sister with "female genitalia as a monstrous sign" that threatens "to give birth to equally horrific offspring" (Creed 56). Though subtle, the indications of Roderick's forbidden desire are present throughout *House of Usher*.

Much of the credit for the film's success goes to Vincent Price, whose performance avoids the self-conscious histrionics and audience winking that undermine some of his later characterizations and contribute mightily to his reputation as a "camp" performer. Poe describes Roderick as a person with "a countenance not easily to be forgotten," including luminous eyes, thin lips, a strong chin, and "hair of a more than web-like softness and tenuity" (234)—a description well embodied by the film's star—who paints and endures a "morbid condition of the auditory nerve which render[s] all music intolerable to the sufferer, with the exception of certain effects of stringed instruments" (237). Allegedly, Price himself suggested dyeing his hair white to suggest Roderick's hypersensitivity and rapidly deteriorating mind and body (Nollen 141). Price makes the most out of his distinctive voice, subtly lowering it when Roderick seems threatening (as in the portrait gallery, where he tells Philip that "the history of the Ushers is a history of savage degradations"), making it higher and raspy when describing his cruelly heightened morbidity of the senses ("I can hear the scratch of rat claws in the stone walls!" he hisses to Philip), and smooth and comforting when addressing his beloved Madeline. "Don't you know I love you more than anything in the world? Can't

you see it's my love for you that makes me act as I do?" he pleads tenderly, the true nature of his affection almost—but not quite—masked by Price's sincere delivery.

Price also conveys Roderick's unhealthy obsessions through the use of his expressive eyes. The actor alters his glance continuously throughout the picture, conveying Usher's intelligence and commanding presence when protesting Winthrop's marital plans, then squinting as if recoiling from a blow when Winthrop raises his protesting voice to a painful volume. When he addresses Madeline directly, Roderick's eyes soften; yet when he spies her kissing Philip passionately, his eyes blaze, suggesting jealousy, panic, and heartbreak simultaneously.

In addition to his voice and his eyes, Price accomplishes a lot with gestures—or the lack of them. At times the actor seems particularly motionless, his arms at his sides but tensed, as if expecting a physical altercation. At other times Roderick is depicted making deliberate and controlled moves within his limited personal space—the scenes of Roderick plucking the strings of his lute, producing an odd and unsettling tune, for example—that imply his growing frustration with his inability to dictate the minions of his crumbling world. Most significantly, Roderick strokes Madeline's hair and gently guides her to her room. These fatherly gestures are replaced with more sinister, sensual contact with his sister during a dream sequence in which Philip sees himself overwhelmed by Usher ancestors as a triumphant Roderick carries Madeline away in what appears to be a marital embrace.

Price's ability to convey so much information and such conflicting emotions is especially crucial given the fact that any explicit mention of incest was taboo for movies

Price's ability to convey so much information and such conflicting emotions is especially crucial given the fact that any explicit mention of incest was taboo for movies in 1960. His performance, frankly, far outshines his young co-stars, Damon and Fahey, neither of whom seem particularly comfortable with delivering their faux Victorian dialogue, much less conveying the complex and provocative emotional conflicts inherent in the story. Yet even this obvious deficiency in acting experience and ability contributes mightily to the emotional tensions in *House of Usher*, for there is something about Price's professionalism and polish that underscores the innocence of the young lovers whose union he opposes. It is almost as if the older actor's experience and worldliness imbue Roderick Usher with suggestions of emotional ruin brought upon by his greater knowledge of the world outside the family mansion. Damon and Fahey, by contrast, give less credible performances that nevertheless telegraph the inability of their characters to comprehend fully the extent of their hideous plight.

As with so many of Price's screen villains, Roderick Usher is a man out of touch with the world around him, a relic of a bygone era when the patriarchal social system allowed the older brother in an orphaned family to control his younger, female relatives. S. S. Prawer asserts that horror films succeed because "the terror they induce in us, and articulate for us, is not infrequently terror at the order we have created or help to uphold as well as the anarchic desires that oppose such order" (270). In the context of *House of Usher*, Prawer's theory indicts Roderick for his responsibility in upholding a sexist and increasingly obsolete social system.

“You cannot order my life, Roderick,” Madeline protests at one point, yet this is precisely what personal inclination, buttressed by nineteenth-century cultural norms, inspires Roderick to do. In a major thematic departure from the original story (in which her most autonomous act is to break out of her tomb), Madeline aspires to a degree of freedom and independence impossible to reach within the confines of the Usher home. Times are changing, a new world order—a new life—awaits Madeline, and Roderick cannot stand to lose her in the process. The madness he fears she will unleash on the world—“most of all does this evil reside in her,” he warns Philip—is of less concern than the madness that will consume him if the house of Usher is left without its mistress. Thus it appears that Philip is the hero of *House of Usher*, come to rescue Madeline from the madness and death that will be her lot if she doesn’t escape her brother’s clutches (it is interesting to speculate about just how Philip and Madeline met; on what pretext was she allowed to visit Boston in the first place?). Certainly the necessity of a virile young hero was a given in most 1960s-era horror films (and most films of other genres as well). However, a careful reading of the film reveals some intriguing issues in the relationship between Philip and Madeline, issues that suggest more ironic similarities between Roderick and Philip than either character would readily admit.

While Philip Winthrop is young, dashing, and apparently sincere in his love for Madeline, he is not completely liberated from the hegemony that so restricts Madeline’s opportunities. He constantly pleads with her to leave with him, and he protests his genuine concern for her repeatedly to Madeline, Roderick, and even the Usher butler, Bristol (Harry Ellerbe). Yet once Philip believes matters are finally working out in his

favor, he begins to demonstrate some of the very same assumptions that permeate Roderick's attitude towards Madeline. Knowing that his bride-to-be is wasting away and not eating, Philip brings her breakfast in bed—a thin and unappetizing gruel, apparently the only sustenance her weak system can take. Cajoling her to eat something, Philip seems half-serious when he admonishes her, saying “I'll have no scrawny women in my house.” There is no ambiguity about a later statement: when Madeline continues to predict her imminent demise, Philip sternly rebukes her, finally declaring, “I forbid you to ever say that again!” Clearly Philip Winthrop is operating under the same assumptions about the roles of women in society that—in an exaggerated and perverted sense—Roderick Usher embraces. It is telling that, for the most part, Philip and Roderick argue over Madeline's future, yet she is never given the opportunity to contribute to the debate. The doomed Miss Usher gets no vote in her fate; Philip begs her to run away with him rather than participate in a family decision-making process.

Madeline's lack of freedom and self-determination manifests itself in other ways. Philip learns from Bristol that the last of the Usher women is prone to spells of sleepwalking. Specifically she unconsciously makes her way to the crypt in the basement of the mansion because “she is obsessed with thoughts of death,” as the old butler puts it. Obsession with death is not merely a symptom of Madeline's mental erosion; it is subconsciously an obsession with freedom, a desire on Madeline's part to liberate herself from the oppressions of her family, her history, and even the conventions of society itself. Cataleptic seizures manifest themselves, apparently in response to the incredible levels of emotional stress to which Madeline is exposed.

It is a cataleptic spell, interestingly, that leads to the film's climax. Madeline is discovered in the crypt, apparently having collapsed while wandering in her sleep. The three men in the house hastily arrange a funeral service—during which Roderick notices a slight movement of his sibling's hand. Thus Roderick willingly buries Madeline alive, a deception Philip discovers only when Bristol inadvertently confesses. This is a deliberate and significant departure from the short story, in which Roderick seems to accidentally inter his sister. The terrified suitor rushes to Madeline's coffin, only to find it empty. Roderick has spirited her away, claiming she is truly dead this time when Philip confronts him. However, Madeline is not dead yet; unfortunately, the experience of being literally buried alive, combined with her figurative burial under oppressive cultural and familial norms, has shattered the fragile remnants of her sanity.

Madeline attacks her brother, strangling him with a final burst of manic energy. As they fight, the house catches fire; the noisy and ominous fissure in the wall (here as in Poe's story a symbol of a cracked and crumbling mind) finally gives way, and Philip barely escapes with his life. As the ruins of the house sink into a brackish lake, a title card repeats the last line of Poe's tale: "the deep and dark tarn closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the house of Usher" (245).

Corman provides a final shot of Roderick and Madeline, lying dead in an embrace that "evokes both physical violence and the tumult of repressed sexual passion" in the ruins of "the house [that] has symbolized their inbred world throughout the film" (Silver and Ursini, *More* 51). The shot seems customized from Allen Tate's vision of the literary Madeline as "the unquiet spirit of the vampire [who] in falling prone upon her brother . . .

siblings will remain together for eternity, precisely as the fatalistic Roderick—and possibly Madeline herself—have always wished it to be.

Whether his unnatural love was requited or not, Roderick is finally united with his beloved Madeline, and in a grotesque parody of marriage. Winthrop, tellingly, lives on—but without the object of his affection. In the end there simply is no room for him in Madeline's life—or afterlife. The Usher line is extinct, and Winthrop has lost the woman he loves. Is he doomed to mourn her forever? Will he be transformed by his terrifying experiences and dreadful loss into a typical Poe protagonist, obsessed with the life (and death) of the fiancée he will never again see? These questions haunt the viewer long after the bleak and fatalistic conclusion of *House of Usher*.

Chapter III

“The Razor Edge of Destiny”: *Pit and the Pendulum* (1961)

The critical and (especially) financial success of *House of Usher* guaranteed a follow-up vehicle, and after briefly considering other projects Roger Corman choose “The Pit and the Pendulum” as the sophomore entry in his Poe cycle. The resulting project is “a claustrophobic film that investigates a small group of characters caught in a nightmare of murder, torture, madness, incest, and hallucinatory images” (Silver and Ursini, *Roger* 150). This investigation follows a familiar pattern in the cycle, as the Corman-helmed productions foreground sexual anxieties such as gender role reversal and female sexual aggression that Poe only suggests, often in a romanticized fashion, in the source material. Ultimately the film successfully illustrates the physical/mental degradation and death that inevitably results from such a potent brew of such intense psychosexual impulses, which are further complicated by suggestions of gender ambivalence on the part of Vincent Price’s character, Nicholas Medina.

Originally published in 1842, “The Pit and the Pendulum” is properly numbered among Poe’s psychological horror stories, as opposed to his more overtly supernatural offerings. The anonymous narrator of the story relates the bizarre torments visited upon him by the monks of the Spanish Inquisition, which include being plunged into total darkness and exposed to a yawning well, or pit; being confined to “a species of low framework of wood” (Poe 251), from which he is forced to watch a razor-sharp pendulum slowly descend upon his person; and finally being oppressed by heated walls, which begin to close in on him, inexorably pushing him towards the abysmal pit. At the

last moment, having expressed “the agony of [his] soul . . . in one, loud, long, and final scream of despair” (Poe 257), the narrator is personally rescued by General Lasalle, Napoleon’s cavalry commander.

The difficulties of transforming this brief, essentially one-man tale into a feature-length motion picture were immediately apparent to Corman and Matheson. Having previously expanded “The Fall of the House of Usher” with great success, Matheson seized upon the notion of “[imposing] a plot from an old suspense mystery on [Poe’s] basic premise”—an admission of liberal “borrowing” from the plot of Price’s earlier horror classic, *House on Haunted Hill*, according to Denis Meikle (78). Whether or not Matheson consciously referred to the 1958 William Castle production, it is significant that both films feature adulterous lovers conspiring against the woman’s husband, played in both cases by Vincent Price.

The adulterous conspiracy plot twist is far from the only alteration to Poe’s storyline found in Matheson’s script. Whereas the original story apparently takes place in 1808, the year Napoleon captured Toledo from Spain, *Pit and the Pendulum* (note the omission of the initial article) is definitely set in 1546—just after the Spanish Inquisition’s most significant period of operation, Meikle notes (76). Furthermore, Poe’s unnamed narrator is identified as Francis Barnard (John Kerr), an Englishman who journeys to Spain to investigate the circumstances surrounding the death of his sister, Elizabeth. Arriving at Castillo Medina, Barnard is greeted by Catherine (Luana Anders), loyal sister of troubled Nicholas, who still grieves for his dead wife.

Nicholas Medina, “a tortured, unbalanced, and greatly wronged man,” abruptly appears when Francis and Catherine investigate “terrifying clacks of immense clockwork and chains” emanating from the castle dungeon (Miller 167-168). Initially Nicholas explains that Elizabeth died from an unknown illness—“something in her blood,” he claims—but soon Francis learns the truth: Elizabeth died of fright, according to family physician Dr. Leon (Antony Carbone). Barnard also discovers that Catherine and Nicholas’ father, Sebastian (also played by Price in flashbacks), was one of the Inquisition’s chief torturers—a talent he put to malevolent use on his unfaithful wife, Isabella, who had been conducting an affair with Sebastian’s brother, Bartoleme. Operating in his personal basement torture chamber, Sebastian beat his brother to death and buried his wife alive, not realizing that young Nicholas was secretly watching the entire gruesome business. As a result of his mother’s horrible demise, Nicholas has grown up with an acute fear of premature burial.

Soon the guilt-ridden Nicholas finds his slender grasp on sanity slipping; he begins to hear Elizabeth calling to him, and the entire household is disturbed by the unmistakable sound of the late Donna Medina’s harpsichord. Nicholas insists on breaking into his late wife’s tomb, where to his horror he discovers she has been buried alive, “her tortured face frozen in a rictus of terror, her bulging eyes, her clawlike fingers, the skin stretched tight and gray” in what Stephen King calls “the most important moment in the post-1960 horror film” (135). Eventually Elizabeth’s ghostly voice—“a terrifying mixture of malicious coaxing and playful seduction,” according to Mark A. Miller (167)—leads Nicholas beneath the house to the family crypt, where he witnesses

his wife slowly emerge from her coffin. Elizabeth (Barbara Steele) pursues Nicholas to the torture chamber, where he stumbles to his apparent death. Dr. Leon arrives and embraces Elizabeth; they have been conducting their affair in secret, and their plan to drive Nicholas mad has resulted in his unanticipated demise.

Nicholas isn't really dead, but his mind is finally unhinged. Moreover, Nicholas now thinks he is his father, and Nicholas/Sebastian avenges himself by tossing Leon in the torture chamber's pit and locking a gagged Elizabeth in an iron maiden. Price engages in a particularly effective bit of acting in these scenes, gradually adopting the mannerisms of Sebastian, "a sadistic cripple, wild-eyed and wicked, and quite, quite mad" (Meikle 81). When Francis confronts him, Nicholas confines his brother-in-law to a platform over the pit, above which the titular pendulum begins to swing. Ultimately Catherine and a servant free Francis, and Nicholas plunges to his death in the pit. As the survivors depart, Catherine remarks that the torture chamber will be permanently sealed; Corman's camera zooms in on the terrified eyes of Elizabeth, now doomed to slow starvation in the iron maiden.

Clearly many elements of *Pit and the Pendulum* are borrowed from *House of Usher*. Like the Usher mansion, Castillo Medina is a Gothic pile, ancient even in the film's period setting. Similarly, the Medina family crypt, as well as the torture chamber, is located beneath the house, and the protagonist is another young man who makes a perilous journey in what turns out to be a vain effort to "save" an ostensibly "innocent" young woman. Both films incorporate Freudian principles by requiring characters to descend into basement crypts; these downward movements symbolize the exploration of

the unconscious and the investigation of emotions long thought “dead.” In addition, these trips to the basement suggest the “downward spiral” that the primary characters must inevitably follow to their ultimate doom.

Once again the Price character is a “guilt-ridden, sexually tormented aesthete” (Morris 100) whose grip on sanity is tenuous at best. Like Roderick Usher, Nicholas Medina lives with his female sibling, his only surviving relative,. Most importantly, both *House of Usher* and *Pit and the Pendulum* emphasize catalepsy and premature burial—a favorite Poe motif—to generate chills as well as plot twists, although in the latter film the cataleptic seizure upon which so much depends is faked.

While at first glance Corman and Matheson may seem to borrow too liberally from themselves, they actually expand their exploration of certain concepts embedded in Poe’s fiction. Nicholas Medina is at least as dedicated to Elizabeth as Roderick Usher is to Madeline. “I worshipped her,” Nicholas tells Francis at one point, a statement that becomes tragically ironic once Elizabeth’s infidelity comes to light. Nicholas demonstrates an even more ambivalent degree of desire suffused with dread toward Elizabeth than Roderick demonstrates toward Madeline.

Elements of Price’s performance symbolize certain ambiguities pertaining to established concepts of gender. These ambiguities are somewhat exaggerated and foreshadow the actor’s reputation as a specialist in “camp.” Judith Butler has described “a sedimentation of gender norms” that is parodied by cross-dressing and other examples of “gender parody”; ultimately these parodies challenge the “social fictions” that compose traditional assumptions of sex roles (2500). In this context, Price’s early

interpretation of Nicholas as emotionally unstable and physically weak seems campy because it appears to feminize the actor. Furthermore, Nicholas' sickly demeanor, which Price communicates through languid gestures and a plaintive, slightly whiny voice tone, implies a lack of masculine vigor that may serve as the initial source of conflict between Nicholas and his wife. If Nicholas has displayed "feminine" weakness prior to Elizabeth's faked death, then it is logical she compensates for this shortcoming by becoming more sexually aggressive, assuming the "masculine" traits that Nicholas has consciously or unconsciously eschewed. Elizabeth's aggression, which culminates in the plot of murderous deception she crafts with the doctor, is the final result of this transference of gender roles. Thus the unstable personas of Nicholas and Elizabeth Medina symbolize Butler's assertion that gender "is also a norm that can never be fully internalized" and is "impossible to embody" (2501).

The sexual ambiguities and obsessions suggested in *Pit and the Pendulum* are considerably more explicit and complex than those hinted at in *House of Usher*. References to aberrant impulses and fetishes abound in the 1961 production; on the most basic level, the film's focus on torture and pain recalls the nomenclature of sadomasochism. Sebastian's cruel delight in torturing his wife and brother—to say nothing of his victims in the Inquisition—strongly suggests sexual arousal. It is said that Sebastian punished Isabella after "accusing her of vile debaucheries with his brother," but the precise nature of these clearly sexually motivated activities is left unnamed, no doubt in deference to the social decorum prevalent in the less liberated early 1960s. Under the

circumstances, though, it seems likely that Isabella and Bartolome engaged in an affair that involved at least a significant amount of sadomasochistic activity.

Nicholas' fascination with his father's predilections involves not just horror and guilt about his family but ambivalence about his own emotional responses to torture, which partially explains the "air of definite guilt" that emanates from him. Nicholas' ultimate revenge on Leon and Elizabeth occurs after he has assumed the personality of his father, but this transformation also suggests that Nicholas has finally overcome his ambivalence about his sexuality and is now truly a sadist. Corman and Matheson obviously want audiences to respond to the irony inherent in Nicholas' repetition of his father's wicked deeds, but there is another irony in play as well: Nicholas Medina has embraced sadomasochism as an expression of personal power, and he no longer resists the challenge to "normal" sexual desire that he has clung to in his desperate attempt to maintain his sanity. In a sense, Nicholas' acceptance of his father's persona represents "a monstrous parody of a 'real-life' coming-out process" similar to that found in later works such as Joel Schumacher's 1987 vampire movie *Lost Boys* (Benthoff 253).

In her influential essay "When the Woman Looks," Linda Williams notes that "in the classic horror film, the woman's look at the monster offers at least a potentially subversive recognition of the power and potency of a nonphallic sexuality" (24). This idea is certainly manifested in Elizabeth's growing interest in her late father-in-law's collection of torture devices. Nicholas describes the "haunted fascination" Elizabeth developed before she died, "as if the aura of pain and suffering which surrounded [the devices] was leading her to sickness and to death." Elizabeth thus demonstrates

sadomasochistic tendencies, which is significant given that sadomasochists are stimulated by pain and the psychological ramifications of power exchange rather than ordinary genital couplings.

Elizabeth's unusual preferences are further illustrated by the speech with which she teases the apparently deceased Nicholas. "I have you exactly as I want you—helpless," she purrs. "Is it not ironic, oh my husband? Your wife an adulteress, your mother an adulteress, your uncle an adulterer, your closest friend an adulterer—do you not find that amusing, dear Nicholas?" Elizabeth's mocking sincerity recalls the verbal torments of a dominatrix or a dominant "hot wife"—a woman who openly engages in extramarital sex, often with the more or less willing consent of her cuckolded husband. Such sexual hegemony suggests both an exaggeration and a reversal of traditional gender roles, although ultimately these roles are reaffirmed. Elizabeth's dominant tendencies identify her as the "masculine" partner in the relationship. By the same token, Nicholas' physical and emotional indecisiveness make him ineffective and submissive, coding him as the more "feminine" partner. Yet this reversal of gender assumptions does not last; it is violently and fatally suppressed when Nicholas' personality is replaced by his father, resulting in a brutal re-assertion of psychosexual norms.

The casting of Barbara Steele in the role of Elizabeth Medina is crucial to the success of the film and the potency of its sexual imagery; the performer's "wicked sensuality" is one of the "superior qualities" of the production, according to Don G. Smith (120). Prior to shooting the Poe adaptation, Steele headlined *Black Sunday*, an excellent Italian vampire film that AIP distributed in the United States; by joining the cast

of *Pit and the Pendulum*, Steele solidified her position as the premier “scream queen” of her generation. Thanks to her striking features and piercing eyes, Steele perfectly embodies both the dread and the desire necessary to imply alluring and transgressive sexuality. It is easy to believe that this dark beauty could be a predatory force of evil, a sexual libertine or a wonton member of the living dead.

Yet in spite of her “bad girl” mien, the actress also conveys a subtle sense of innocence—an unusual duality previously developed by *Black Sunday* director Mario Bava, who cast her as both villain (ancient vampire-witch) and victim (innocent descendant of said vampire-witch) and later exploited by countless lesser talents desperate to make the most out of her physical attributes. Regardless of how dominant she eventually becomes, Elizabeth’s existence is defined by her husband. It is Nicholas’ wealth and aristocratic heritage that places the couple in the upper strata of society; her material comfort and status, then, is predicated on his status regardless of the degree of her putative superiority in the relationship. As Gary Morris observes, “this is Nicholas’ world, and his wife embodies Nicholas’ impulse toward self-destruction”—an acknowledgement that his obsessions ultimately define both of their lives (106).

The aforementioned final shot of Steele’s terrified, doomed eyes is arguably the most frightening image in the entire movie, and the intensity of her gaze, whether suggesting lust, cunning, or fear, dovetails nicely with the rich tones of Price’s voice to make the couple believably sinister, psychotic, and sexually ambivalent. Speaking of actors’ voices, Elizabeth’s wicked yet alluring voice is not Steele’s; according to Lucy Chase Williams, Steele’s “voice had to be dubbed prior to the film’s release” because

director Corman thought her accent was too “working class” compared to the other actors (166). Be that as it may, “whoever did dub Steele’s voice was perfect” (Miller 167).

As potentially disturbing as sadomasochism might be to conventional sensibilities, it is marginally less upsetting than the shadow of incest that falls upon *Pit and the Pendulum*. As Alain Silver and James Ursini point out, Nicholas suffers from a “traumatic oedipal memory” as a result of seeing his father torture and kill his mother; his final descent into the torture chamber is “a way of reliving his oedipal childhood trauma” and thus “is the key to understanding the film as well as the character of Nicholas” (Roger 153). It is no coincidence that Nicholas has taken a bride who resembles his mother—tall, brunette, and cruelly beautiful. For most of his life, Nicholas has been haunted by his mother’s adultery and horrific demise; his conflicting emotions have coalesced into an attraction-repulsion towards the late Isabella that compels him to choose Elizabeth—ultimately another unfaithful wife—to join him in his tragic castle. Thus in a sense the dread and desire Nicholas feels for Elizabeth mirror the conflicted feelings he has towards his mother.

Furthermore, the affair conducted between Isabella and Bartolome—siblings-in-law—is itself symbolically incestuous; although technically they are not related by blood, their legal connection identifies them as family in the eyes of society. This fact suggests another meaning inherent in Sebastian’s statement about Isabella and Bartolome engaging in “vile debaucheries” than has been previously stated; incest is far more repugnant to conventional sensibilities than sadomasochism. So strict is the social taboo against incest that it finally gives the deranged Sebastian a comparatively rational

justification for the murders he commits: Sebastian kills primarily for revenge, certainly, but he also kills out of a desire to restore and re-affirm the hegemony of traditional sexual expression, itself defined and controlled by the Catholic church, which is symbolized by Sebastian's affiliation with the Inquisition.

It appears the entire Medina household suffers from a sexual obsession with other family members except for Catherine—who, tellingly, has returned to her ancestral home only recently as the film opens, and then for the express purpose of looking after her brother in his period of mourning. In the absence of a husband or children, it must be assumed that she has never married. Why, then, has she left in the first place? The character functions as symbol for conventional sexuality; she represents a nominal “heroine” in the film, and therefore she cannot be depicted as a regular inhabitant of Castillo Medina. It is logical to assume that if Catherine remained long in the castle she would eventually become as psychosexually disturbed as her brother. That this idea occurred to Corman is strongly suggested by an additional sequence shot a few years later for the film's television broadcast on the ABC network. These scenes portray Catherine, again played by Luana Anders, “in a madhouse, telling the horrifying story, with the original film presented as her flashback,” according to Mark A. Miller (171). Presumably it is prolonged exposure to the very atmosphere of the castle that made Catherine go insane.

Although Elizabeth's apparent ghostliness is soundly disproven, there is nevertheless a subtle evocation of the supernatural throughout *Pit and the Pendulum*. Corman and Matheson go to considerable lengths to establish the psychological issues

Corman and Matheson go to considerable lengths to establish the psychological issues that are the root cause of the film's conflicts, but suggestions of preternatural phenomena nevertheless manifest themselves. Early on, Nicholas describes the instruments of torture as "my birthright—and my curse," a line that literally links the dysfunctional Medina clan to a supernatural agency. "If Elizabeth Medina walks the corridors of this castle, it's her spirit, not herself," Leon remarks; of course he makes this statement to help drive Nicholas mad, but the line still recalls the very real belief in ghosts prevalent in the sixteenth century. Finally, the transformation in personality that Nicholas experiences when he "becomes" Sebastian is so rapid and complete that it implies a spiritual possession more than a psychological development. The notion that the spirits of the dead threaten to assume the personalities of the living makes sense given the decades of pain, misery, and horror associated with the "haunted" house of Medina and is reiterated later in other entries, including *The Haunted Palace* and *Tomb of Ligeia*.

Much has been made of Corman's techniques to portray the aura of madness and dread that emanates from the film. He opens the film with a lengthy pre-credit sequence that consists of a "Panavision vista of paints on glass" that finally "projects a surreal, otherworldly quality upon the real coastline" that sets the first actual scene (Miller 164). Corman makes frequent use of colored filters during flashback scenes, using blue filters for more erotic moments and red filters for depictions of violence. Corman also exploits the talents of art director Daniel Haller to the fullest; Haller "built immense sets all the way up to the trusses and ceilings of the soundstage to create an aura of depth and menace" and "painted murals along the walls" of the torture chamber, giving sumptuous

visual symbols that allowed the producer-director to convey “color, vitality, and dynamic tension” (Corman 83).

Perhaps the greatest thematic achievement in *Pit and the Pendulum* is the film’s depiction of a fatalistic worldview well aligned with Poe’s own. Corman and Matheson constantly reiterate the sense of unavoidable destiny that foreshadows the Medina tragedy, often through Nicholas’ weary musings or the doom-laden atmosphere of the house itself. The film compellingly demonstrates “the repetition of time,” which as Alain Silver and James Ursini point out is “a favorite Corman theme” (*Roger* 153). In this context, “though Barnard may look to be an innocent victim of Nicholas’ insane delusions, he can be thought of as a true successor to Bartolome by threatening to steal away one of the Medina women,” thereby contributing to the notion of inevitable and repetitive destiny (Thornton 220). Nicholas’ final speech to Francis, trapped beneath the descending pendulum, is particularly noteworthy:

Do you know where you are, Bartolome? You are about to enter hell. In hell, Bartolome, IN HELL! . . . The razor edge of destiny . . . Thus the condition of man: bound on an island from which he can never have hope to escape, surrounded by the waiting pit of Hell, subject to the inexorable pendulum of fate, which must destroy him finally.

As Mark A. Miller notes, “this melancholy metaphor is unmistakably the epitaph for Edgar Allan Poe” (170). It is a chilling bit of dialogue that concisely summons up the tremendous forces, psychological, supernatural, and otherwise, that haunt the characters in *Pit and the Pendulum*—and by extension, the world beyond Castillo Medina.

Chapter IV

“Dedicated to Your Destruction”: *Tales of Terror* (1962)

Having briefly departed the Poe series by sitting out of *Premature Burial* (1962), Vincent Price returned in not one but three roles for *Tales of Terror* (1962). With this film, director Corman and screenwriter Matheson strayed from the tradition of fleshing out Poe’s short stories into feature length, experimenting with the anthology format in order to convey both horror and humor and to achieve a greater degree of fidelity to the stories. The episodic nature of *Tales of Terror* recalls *Dead of Night* (1945), the classic British portmanteau that provided the blueprint for such films, even as it forecasts the group of horrific anthologies produced by the British-based Amicus company in the Sixties and Seventies, of which *Dr. Terror’s House of Horrors* (1964) was the first.

Tales of Terror opens with “Morella,” the least faithful Poe adaptation in the movie. In the story Morella is an expert in the black arts whose arcane knowledge allows her spirit to live on after death, eventually possessing the body of the daughter she delivers even as she expires. Although Locke expresses “feelings of deep yet most singular affection” for his wife, he “never spoke of passion, nor thought of love” in regard to her—suggesting a psychological seduction on Morella’s part (667). Locke lovingly raises his daughter, but he doesn’t christen her until she turns ten, at which point he is mysteriously compelled to name her Morella. The child immediately dies, and as Locke places her in the family vault he discovers “no traces of the first, in the charnel where I laid the second, Morella” (671). This of course is very different from abandoning his child, as in the movie, and giving her an entirely different name.

Price portrays Locke, a drunken widower wasting away in his crumbling mansion by the sea. To this desolate place comes Lenora (Maggie Pierce), the daughter Locke sent away years before. Initially Locke blames Lenora for the death of his wife, Morella, who died giving birth to Lenora; “Morella, my beloved wife, your murderer has returned,” he murmurs to his deceased wife’s portrait. However, Lenora is dying of an unspecified illness, and she hopes to effect a reunion with her father before she passes. Locke immediately agrees to the reconciliation, but soon Lenora falls ill and dies. At the point of death her body is possessed by the spirit of Morella (Leona Gage), whose features superimpose themselves over the daughter’s face. Morella/Lenora then strangles Locke, and during their struggle a fire breaks out, consuming the house and everyone in it. In death both Morella and Lenora—whose body has aged and deteriorated as her soul is supplanted by her mother—are depicted with wicked grins of triumph upon their lips.

“Morella” is the weakest of the three segments of *Tales of Terror*. Denis Meikle dismisses it accurately: “Price turns in one of his more intense performances for a pasta of pre-digested ingredients and a storyline into which even Matheson could barely be bothered to breathe life or logic” (87). Ultimately what Matheson incorporates into the episode is largely swiped from Poe’s similarly themed but superior tale, “Ligeia,” which itself would be adapted for Corman by Robert Towne a few years later. Locke constantly bemoans the loss of his wife and expresses hatred for his only child, yet when he learns Lenora is terminally ill he instantly changes his mind, expressing sorrow and a strong desire to reconcile. Even more nonsensical is Morella’s treatment of Locke when she returns from the dead; why does she murder the man who has loved her so faithfully for a

quarter century after her death? No mention is made of her magical expertise, so no explanation for her supernatural abilities is given. Locke has even robbed Morella's grave and keeps her mummified corpse in his bedroom—but Lenora's reaction to this blatant touch of necrophilia is mild, to say the least.

It is easy and convenient to dismiss “Morella” as lazy scripting on Matheson's part, but nevertheless the changes he makes to the storyline are rich with symbolism. Morella's ability to possess Lenora's soul represents a perversion of the notion that parents achieve a degree of immortality through their children. The natural order is compromised when the dead live on, and the fact that the wicked mother would plot to overwrite her daughter's personality—her soul—with her own is unnerving. In the nineteenth century, childbirth was an especially serious danger to women's health; many women died delivering babies, and the lack of effective birth control methods meant that fertile women were either pregnant or nursing infants during the vast majority of their childbearing years. Morella's willingness to “become” her own daughter can thus be seen as a bizarre retribution for losing her own life by the process of bringing Lenora into the world. Moreover, Morella's assumption of control over Lenora symbolizes the conflict inherent in relationships in which an overbearing mother dominates her daughter's adult life (and specifically echoes the relationship between Eleanor Vance and her domineering mother in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, which had recently been published when Matheson penned his “Morella” script).

Morella's desire for revenge against Locke seems exceptionally misdirected given his decades of fidelity to her memory; what motivates the attack on the faithful husband?

Considering that Morella died in childbirth, it is likely she blames her husband for impregnating her. As a husband at this time, Locke would be well within his legal and cultural “rights” to demand coitus with his wife, regardless of whether she wanted to engage in sexual relations or not. Many an inattentive or inconsiderate husband has learned to cherish his late wife’s memory after her death, and Locke’s devotion could easily be inspired, in part, by guilt associated with his role in Morella’s death.

Similarly, Locke may have killed Morella deliberately. Certainly there is evidence in Poe’s story that Locke may have played a part in Morella’s death. Before her final illness emerges, his wife’s strange interests and personality “oppress [him] as a spell”; furthermore he muses

Shall I then say that I longed with an earnest and consuming desire for the moment of Morella’s decease? I did; but the fragile spirit clung to its tenement of clay for many days—for many weeks and irksome months—until my tortured nerves obtained the mastery over my mind, and I grew furious through delay, and, with the heart of a fiend, cursed the days, and the hours, and the bitter moments, which seemed to lengthen and lengthen as her gentle life declined—like shadows in the dying of the day. (668)

It is conceivable, then, that Locke sped his wife on her way to the great beyond; doubtless he suffered terribly under the pressure and stress of caring for his slowly dying spouse. In any case, the ambiguity of his feelings is hinted at in the film version. Furthermore, “Morella” follows a motif established in *House of Usher*, developed in *Pit and the Pendulum*, and revised to meet plot requirements in *The Raven* and *Tomb of Ligeia*

wherein a woman's posthumous revenge symbolizes an awareness of gender inequity not emphasized by Poe. The redressing of real or perceived wrongs acknowledges the dawn of the sexual revolution and is accomplished with such aggression that the victims cannot avoid becoming signifiers of villainy; the vengeance of Morella and the other Poe females must be explicit in order to underscore its relevance to a mass audience composed, in great measure, of teenagers and young adults.

Ultimately Locke himself is an ambiguous protagonist in the "Morella" segment. The fact that he keeps his wife's withered body in his bed strongly suggests necrophilia, and the fact that his daughter "becomes" his beloved wife implies a degree of incestuous attraction between Locke and Lenora. One cannot help but wonder what the nature of their life together would be if Locke and his daughter had remained together in solitude for many years. It is significant that for this episode of *Tales of Terror* Price shaved off his trademark moustache, giving him a younger, more virile appearance than is customary in his horror performances (or indeed almost any of his work in the postwar era). This visual allusion to Price's early cinematic career as a romantic lead is key to an understanding of the Locke character and his motivations. In this context Morella's thirst for revenge can be explained by her desire to avenge her mistreatment at Locke's hands, and as a means of protecting Lenora as well from the tragedy of incest.

Notions of incest are also suggested by Lenora's explanation of how her life has turned out since her rejection by her father. Lenora explains that she has had many failed relationships with men, including a marriage that has apparently ended in divorce—or desertion on Lenora's part. "I cannot give, you see," Lenora cryptically explains—

without ever quite specifying what it is she cannot give. Since she apparently has no children, Lenora may never have consummated her marriage. Clearly she feels she cannot maintain a romantic relationship with a man without reaching some understanding of her father and his motivations. The father is the most significant signifier of the concept of the male to children, especially female children, so in a sense Lenora cannot “give” herself to another man without first learning how to do so from Locke. The ramifications of this emotional incest, particularly in light of Lenora’s terminal illness (which will prevent her from applying any lesson she learns from her father to a future romantic arrangement), are as perverse to cultural norms as Morella’s excessive lust for life is to the natural order.

The exact nature of Lenora’s illness is never stated, but it is logical that she suffers from venereal disease. Perhaps instead of withholding physical affection from men she has been wanton in her sexual activity in a vain attempt to replace the relationship she never enjoyed with her father. Such promiscuity could easily lead to syphilis or other sexually transmitted diseases for which there was no cure in the nineteenth century. Infidelity compounded with syphilitic infection would certainly justify any divorce proceedings initiated by Lenora’s husband. Of course, it is also possible that it is the husband, not Lenora, who engaged in extramarital sexual activity and thus introduced the disease that is now killing her. Maggie Pierce’s restrained performance, including restrained gestures and a slightly quavering voice, suggests a character consumed with anxiety about the emotions and impulses she fails to completely repress—in effect becoming a distaff version of the unreliable Poe narrators Locke

represents. As a result, a duality between father and daughter is established that mirrors the more explicit duality between mother and daughter. In any case, the ambiguities in the Locke family dynamic, whether implicit or plainly stated, contribute what psychological interest there is to the uneven "Morella" segment.

Sandwiched between two straight adaptations of Poe in *Tales of Terror* is the comic episode "The Black Cat," which incorporates "The Cask of Amontillado" for good measure. Neither of these tales would be included in an accounting of Poe's more humorous works, but Richard Matheson's script picks up on traces of dark comedy in the stories and amplifies them considerably. Although by 1962 Vincent Price was firmly established as a "horror star," he had always demonstrated an affinity for lighter fare going back to his first film, *Service de Luxe* (1938), and further manifested in such films as *Champagne for Caesar* (1950) and *His Kind of Woman* (1951), all harbingers of the somewhat campy humor the actor would later bring to many of his film and television assignments. For "The Black Cat" Price was teamed with another specialist in sinister roles who also evidenced superb comic sensibilities: Peter Lorre. Both actors had appeared in *The Story of Mankind* five years earlier, but "The Black Cat" marked the first time they physically appeared together in a movie; it would also represent, in the words of Paul Castiglia, the birth of "the horror genre's all time classic comedy scream team!" (185).

In "The Black Cat" Poe presents yet another nameless narrator who insists upon his sanity even while confessing to crimes so foul they must surely be the result of madness. Claiming to be a mild-mannered person undone by alcohol, the narrator relates

how his drunkenness leads him to disfigure a beloved cat and abuse his devoted wife before finally killing her. Similarly, “The Cask of Amontillado” is the confession of another murderer, Montresor, who avenges some unnamed slight at the hands of wine expert Fortunato by entombing the living victim within the walls of the catacombs. The confessional nature of the stories, coupled with their shared notion of victims buried within walls, make them appropriate choices for the amalgamation of plots envisioned by Corman and Matheson. The infusion of black comedy and the addition of a love triangle that recognizes gender issues of the 1960s are the most inspired of Matheson’s contributions to this compound of two stories.

In the episode, Lorre stars as Montresor Herringbone, an alcoholic whose perpetual inebriation has kept him unemployed for years. Only his long-suffering wife, Annabel (Joyce Jameson), has prevented the family from total financial collapse thanks to her sewing talents. When Montresor stumbles into a convention of wine merchants, he is ridiculed until he trumps respected oenologist Fortunato Lucreti (Vincent Price) in a wine-tasting contest. Thoroughly humiliated, Fortunato nevertheless escorts the drunken Montresor to his home, where Fortunato and Annabel fall in love (or something reasonably similar) at first sight. Eventually Montresor discovers that his wife is cuckolding him with his new friend; Montresor avenges himself by murdering his wife and burying her and the still-living Fortunato behind a brick wall. Montresor’s crime is discovered, however, when investigating police officers hear a strange cry from behind the freshly mortared wall and tear it down—as in Poe’s story, a black cat has been

inadvertently entombed alive with the doomed lovers; Montresor has “walled the monster up within the tomb” (230).

Much of the humor in “The Black Cat” is due to the contrast in delivery between the two stars. Price’s performance remains somewhat overdone throughout the episode, but Lorre, after playing his drunken scenes broadly, reverts to the subtle sardonic persona he chilled audiences with in such classics as *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934) and *The Maltese Falcon* (1941). Both actors demonstrate a flair for slapstick in the film’s funniest sequence, the wine-tasting contest. Price’s Fortunato demonstrates traditional (albeit exaggerated) techniques, and Lorre’s Montresor is content to simply swig his wine—yet he still correctly identifies both vintage and year! As Price put it to interviewer Lawrence French:

Peter and I played two drunks, but before we did it they brought in this very famous wine taster to show us how it was done. We enjoyed that enormously; we got very drunk in the afternoons . . . I did it exactly the way (the wine taster) showed us, but added just a little bit more, and Peter was doing it the way they didn’t do it, which made for a very funny scene. (qtd. in Castiglia 189)

The wine-tasting contest allows the actors to mine farcical gold through unsubtle jabs at gender stereotypes. Price plays Fortunato as a fop, a dandy—as an aristocratic and possibly homosexual hedonist—as demonstrated by his prissy manners and campy technique. Lorre, despite his diminutive height, high pitched voice, and lascivious leer—all elements the actor used during his career to establish sexually transgressive characters,

characters, which typecast him as a “creep”), comes across as stereotypically heterosexual, gleefully eschewing the “sissified” manner and technique of Price by simply gulping each sample crudely yet identifying the wines accurately.

The way the main characters interact with Annabel is also a study in contrasts. Although the episode is played for laughs, there is no doubt that Montresor treats his wife with particular sadism. The threat of physical violence permeates Lorre’s scenes with Jameson, a fine comic actress who never loses sight of the real danger that threatens Annabel. Montresor hounds his wife, bellowing at her to “give me my money!” Having been out of work for seventeen years, Montresor has no money of his own—it’s Annabel’s sewing money that he claims as rightfully his—and given the Victorian-era setting, he is doing so with the full consent of the law and social custom. Montresor’s exploitation of Annabel is further underscored later, when in a drunken spree he comments to a bartender that “She gives me what is rightfully mine”—a comment that acknowledges Montresor’s fiscal and sexual command of his wife.

Fortunato, on the other hand, treats Annabel with a reverence as exaggerated as Montresor’s sadism. The oenologist woos the object of his affection with excessive romantic gestures, even referring to his friend’s wife as “heart of my heart” in a line, as Mark Clark notes, “Price delivers with sickening earnestness” (94). The lovers share a fondness for cats, as evidenced when Fortunato spots Annabel’s feline pet—like her, despised and abused by Montresor—and lovingly strokes the animal, commenting that “I have several of my own at home.” Ultimately, Fortunato’s attractiveness to Annabel seems to stem from their feminine alignment; he is as dainty and fragile as she is, and

they relate to each other through their appreciation of art, poetry, and other “feminine” interests. Fortunato and Annabel are aesthetic beings, linked by their intuitive and artistic natures. Montresor, of course, is too brutish—too manly—to appreciate the more artistic elements in life. Or so it seems.

Montresor’s ability to expertly recognize fine wines is not merely a coincidence of his profound alcoholism. Somewhere along the way, the cruel drunk developed an aesthetic appreciation for the grape—and given his choice of a lovely bride and a well-appointed home even in the midst of poverty, it is reasonable to believe that Montresor maintains other powers of observation and appreciation, albeit diminished by what Poe calls “the Fiend Intemperance” (“Black” 224) and a compulsion to evidence his masculinity (indeed, this compulsion may be the source of frustration that drives him to drink). Thus when Montresor realizes his wife and friend have betrayed him, he demonstrates a remarkably ability to remain sober and focused enough to plot his horrific revenge. Lorre’s delivery of such lines as “I am genuinely dedicated to your destruction” is truly disturbing as he addresses the appropriately panicky Price.

Interestingly, by giving Montresor a specific motive for his revenge, “The Black Cat” episode departs from Poe’s story “The Cask of Amontillado” completely, since Poe never reveals Fortunato’s insult that inspires Montresor’s fiendish plot. Even so, the film accurately recreates Montresor’s cunning nature. As Poe has Montresor explain to his anonymous audience,

You, who so well know the nature of my soul, will not suppose, however, that I gave utterance to a threat. . . . I must not only punish, but punish with impunity.

A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser. It is equally unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong. (274)

As in the story, the cinematic Fortunato (and Annabel, a character totally absent from “The Cask of Amontillado”) fatally underestimates Montresor, although since the movie incorporates “The Black Cat,” Lorre’s avenger ultimately faces justice. Before Montresor meets his fate, however, his comic cruelties delight and disturb in roughly equal measure, resulting in an entertaining and thoughtful episode.

“The Case of M. Valdemar” closely follows the general outline of Poe’s story, which is essentially a case study of an experiment to determine what the moment of death is like. However, the episode substitutes a villainous hypnotist, Carmichael (Basil Rathbone), for the benign but anonymous narrator of the story. Even more significant is the addition of a female protagonist, an element wholly absent in the source material. The addition of a wife opens the way for two romantic/sexual triangles involving the Price character and his female partner.

Price essays the role of Ernest Valdemar, a dying man whose terminal suffering has been eased by the mesmerist’s ministrations. Valdemar consents to be placed in a hypnotic trance at the moment of his death, assuming the experiment will delay his final passing only briefly. Yet Carmichael manages to keep Valdemar in an indefinite state of suspended animation, becoming increasingly obsessed with the ability to forestall death. Months pass, during which time the voice of Valdemar’s tormented soul occasionally moans for relief. When Carmichael attempts to rape Helene (Debra Paget), Valdemar’s

wife, the semi-dead man lurches from his perennial deathbed and strangles Carmichael, dissolving into “a nearly liquid mass of loathsome—of detestable putrescence” (Poe 103) as he finally expires.

“The Case of M. Valdemar” presents a rare opportunity for Price to portray a completely sympathetic character, a kindly old man who suffers the hellish fate of being imprisoned in a perpetual state of non-death. Even when Valdemar finally rises up and kills Carmichael, he does so more to protect his beloved wife than to exact well-deserved vengeance upon his tormentor. Corman and Matheson are careful to underscore the thoughtfulness and consideration of the character, an especially important task given that he is caught in the middle of two unusual relationship triangles. Valdemar repeatedly tells Helene how much he loves her and expresses his appreciation for her devotion several times during the episode. Most significantly, Valdemar has recognized the attraction between Helene and his young physician, Elliot James (David Frankham). Unlike the typical jealous or homicidal Price husband, Valdemar fully endorses the relationship between his wife and his doctor; he informs Helene that his dying wish is that she marry James.

It is clear from the text that Helene and James have not acted on their feelings out of the love and respect they both demonstrate for Valdemar; for his part, Valdemar knows his wife will be happy and properly cared for by the doctor. Thus the three-way relationship is a sort of chaste *ménage à trois* rather than the conflicted triangle presented in *House of Usher* or “The Black Cat” episode. It is not insignificant that Dr. James is an honorable man with firm ethics, for he will not only win the hand of Valdemar’s widow,

but his fortune as well. Thus Carmichael's villainy is further compounded when he reveals his desire for Helene and her inheritance.

The threat to Helene's property is not present in Poe's story; for that matter, neither Helene nor Dr. James appear in the tale, Valdemar is portrayed as a bachelor, and the nameless mesmerist who narrates the case is portrayed as a sincere and honorable friend of Valdemar who is genuinely concerned with his patient's well being and initiates the hypnotic experiment at Valdemar's request (91). Yet the idea of a female protagonist being menaced by a threat to her property is a common element in the Gothic tale, which Donald E. Westlake glibly defined as a story "about a girl who gets a house" (qtd. in Fisher 73). As James J. Janis points out in his survey of the role of women in horror,

In almost every instance . . . , the heroine is set upon by villains preternatural, outré, or mysterious who seek to deny her birthrights, her honor, her freedom, her happiness, and frequently her life . . . to take away her right of choice. If she gets the house then she has attained freedom. If not then she loses all. (56)

Yet while Carmichael is certainly an evil scoundrel and Valdemar and James are clearly good men, there is an undeniable and unsettling subtext of sexism to the story. It is fairly obvious that what Helene wants for herself is of comparatively little importance in the scenario; although she is in love with the physician, ultimately her desires are secondary to those of her husband and the men who vie to become her next spouse. Although a specific year is not established in the episode, the set and costume designs indicate a setting circa 1845, the year Poe composed the original story. Thus Helene

exists in a time during which the rights of women were sharply curtailed; they could not vote, pursue most professions, or retain ownership of property if they married (unless specifically protected by a “marriage contract” equivalent to a modern prenuptial agreement). Under the circumstances Valdemar’s ostensibly benign wishes are announced in the context of a rigid patriarchy that upholds his right to direct his wife’s destiny long after his death.

Helene is as much a property as a person, as much a commodity as Valdemar’s mansion and fortune (ironically, Valdemar is himself a commodity in terms of his importance to Carmichael’s experiments). Though Carmichael’s lascivious designs on Mrs. Valdemar are telegraphed early on in the episode—he stares at her with a crafty expression mingled with lust—it is also her wealth he covets. As a loving wife, Helene agrees to marry Carmichael on condition that he release her husband’s tortured spirit, but even this reasonable request is refused as the lecherous hypnotist attempts to force himself upon her. It is true that Valdemar is inspired to throw off Carmichael’s psychic yoke at the sight of Helene’s distress, but it is also true that Valdemar must kill Carmichael to protect his final wishes for his wife and his property. As in so many of Poe’s stories, a character’s will becomes a psychic force capable of bestowing supernatural abilities.

It is also significant that Valdemar and Helene are apparently childless. The absence of heirs to the Valdemar name helps clear the way for Carmichael to gain control of Valdemar’s estate. The lack of offspring also suggests the possibility that Valdemar and Helene are not sexually active; indeed, sexual congress is no longer possible for the

old man when the story begins and may not have been for a considerable period of time prior. Given Valdemar's almost worshipful objectification of Helene, it is even possible that the marriage has never been consummated, which implies her virginity remains intact. Under such circumstances Carmichael's intentions are all the more monstrous, for he desires Helene's innocence as well as her rightful fortune.

Whether Helene is a virgin or not, the vigorous young doctor is clearly intended to represent a more appropriate match than either the kindly Valdemar or the wicked Carmichael. The passing of both older men clears the way for Helene to marry Dr. James—and presumably to reproduce with him. Having children with Helene and benefiting from her considerable inheritance is a high honor, a privilege Valdemar intends to grant to an appropriately worthy successor. Furthermore, the acquisition of Valdemar's possessions—including his wife—represents a transformation of sorts: Valdemar in effect “becomes” the man who replaces him in the house and in Helene's bed, thus allowing the old man to live on in the more idealized form of a younger, more virile husband to the young woman. Carmichael's heinous designs therefore threaten not only to supplant Dr. James but also the unusual concept of life after death that Valdemar's wishes represent.

In the end, then, “The Case of M. Valdemar” is an intriguing compound of conflicting wills, both legal and psychological, that incorporates the ironies inherent in a paternalistic system that is undoubtedly sexist even when it seeks to protect women. It is a story of psychological horror that touches on the very real dread that loss of property and material wealth would inspire in anyone, especially a young woman in the nineteenth

century. Don G. Smith accurately notes that the episode also “succeeds largely because of the sympathetic and pitiable trials of Vincent Price and the coldly villainous machinations of Basil Rathbone” (137). As such, it is the most thoughtful and complex of the episodes presented in the film.

One of the most intriguing aspects of *Tales of Terror* is its offering of three very different characters for Price to play. The actor takes full advantage of the opportunity to cross his former leading man image with his current horror star persona in “Morella,” then plays an amorous fop in “The Black Cat,” a subtle acknowledgment of his growing status as a camp icon. Price’s turn as the dying patient in “The Case of M. Valdemar” features the actor as a character much older and less vigorous than himself, a cinematic foreshadowing of the infirmities that would be visited upon him in real life. Ultimately these characters represent the actor’s reel persona even as they become amalgamations of his real personality.

Furthermore, each Price character symbolizes significant challenges to traditional gender construction. In “Morella,” Locke’s obsessions with incest and necrophilia undermine his presumptive role as the paternal figure, compromising that role by allowing the sort of “unregulated permeability” of ethical and sexual norms that “constitutes a site of pollution and endangerment” (Butler 2493). A more obvious erosion of gender performance is associated with Price’s interpretation of Fortunato in “The Black Cat,” whose camp mannerisms suggest homosexuality and thus “disrupt the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence” (Butler 2497). Finally, the aged and infirm Valdemar can no longer function sexually and is reduced to the benevolent tyranny of

directing his wife's existence after his death, vainly attempting to maintain "the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (Butler 2501) long past the point where gender norms are relevant. With each episode, the Price character decays as a representative of normal sex roles; the literal decay of M. Valdemar physically manifests the progressive dissolution that supplies *Tales of Terror* with an additional layer of psychological dread only intermittently present in the Poe sources.

Chapter V

“Nevermore”: *The Raven* (1963)

Having produced and directed four Poe-inspired features in just over two years, Roger Corman began to feel he was in a rut. The thematic similarities between *House of Usher*, *Pit and the Pendulum*, *The Premature Burial*, and *Tales of Terror* were beginning to wear thin through constant repetition; perhaps more significantly, box office receipts for *Tales of Terror* declined slightly in comparison to the gross for *Pit and the Pendulum*, suggesting audiences were tiring of the formula as well. Denis Meikle claims that “preview audiences in the US had singled out ‘The Black Cat’ episode for special mention,” which guaranteed “that the next film in line would be a comedy from start to finish” (89-90). Once again working with screenwriter Richard Matheson, Corman tackled the daunting task of transforming Poe’s most famous poem—a dark meditation on the eternal misery of loss—into a rollicking light comedy that “exploit[s] the grotesquely humorous potential of horror-movie imagery” (Prawer 249). Furthermore, *The Raven* gently lampoons the famous poem, infusing elements of family dysfunction and gender politics that transform the narrative from a somewhat overheated lament for the death of a beautiful woman into a satire of both the Gothic tradition and the patriarchy of sixteenth century Europe.

The Raven tells the tale of three sorcerers and their competition for magical domination. Vincent Price stars as Dr. Erasmus Craven, a mild-mannered and retiring wizard mourning his dead wife upon whom a talking raven calls for assistance. The night bird is a fellow magician, Dr. Adolphus Bedlo (Peter Lorre, reteaming with his “Black

Cat” co-star), who has been transformed as a result of losing a magical duel with the infamous Dr. Scarabus (Boris Karloff). Bedlo is as cantankerous as Craven is kind; when Craven asks the “bird of ill omen” if he will ever again see his lost Lenore, Bedlo responds acidly, “how the hell should I know? What am I, a fortune teller?”

After he is restored to semi-human form, Bedlo discovers that Craven’s father was once the “Grand Master” of a magician’s brotherhood, which is now controlled by Scarabus. The protocols of the brotherhood dictate that Craven should have become Grand Master upon his father’s death, but Craven abandoned his birthright. When Bedlo sees a portrait of Lenore, he claims she lives with Scarabus; accompanied by Craven’s daughter, Estelle (Olive Sturgess), and Bedlo’s son, Rexford (an unusually dashing Jack Nicholson), the wizards set off to investigate. The party learns that Scarabus wants the secret of Craven’s “hand magic,” the ability to cast spells with mere gestures, and he has recruited Bedlo in a plot to lure Craven near. Furthermore, Lenore (Hazel Court) has faked her death and become Scarabus’ mistress, taunting her husband and boasting of his replacement’s greater prestige and power. Eventually Craven and Scarabus engage in a battle of magical pyrotechnics; Craven finally triumphs over the older wizard, whom he leaves in the ruins of the castle with only the shrewish Lenore for company.

Much of the humor in *The Raven* is sophomoric and broad, with little of the black comedy Corman and Matheson brought to “The Black Cat” (much less the dark wit on display in *Comedy of Terrors* the following year, a non-Poe picture that ranks as the funniest of the three comic horrors under discussion). Price mopes around muttering about “the lost Lenore,” occasionally bumping into his massive telescope, and Lex

Baxter's unsubtle score cues each pratfall with overdone musical stings. The only consistently funny element in the film is Lorre's over-the-top mugging, his facial and body distortions foreshadowing "all the manic energy of rubber-limbed Jim Carrey," as Paul Castiliga observes (191). Even better are Lorre's ad-libs, bits of improvisation that allegedly confounded his more formal co-stars, especially Karloff (Meikle 92). While touring the long-neglected Craven laboratory, Bedlo muses, "hard place to keep clean, huh?" Later he remarks that Scarabus would never have beaten him in their magical contest "If I was only sober, which I admit doesn't happen often." During a second duel with Scarabus, the older wizard's superior skills cause Bedlo's magic wand to wilt in his hand. "You dirty old man," Bedlo sneers, disgusted by the implication of impotence.

Regardless of the hit-and-miss nature of the comedy, however, it is clear that the three legendary horror stars on display are enjoying themselves in their first cinematic team-up. More significantly, Price, Lorre, and Karloff lend the proceedings their substantial cinematic charisma, investing the gravity of their mysterious personas in the service of thematic, if not always comic, complexity. Although unabashedly crafted as a trifle by all parties concerned, *The Raven* nevertheless suggests deeper concerns than easy laughs; ultimately the film further develops certain Poesque concepts, in some cases illustrating ideas even more provocatively than the so-called "straight" Poe adaptations.

The 1963 comedy is initially quite faithful to Poe's original poem. The film opens with shots of Price's castle and the crashing waves along the nearby seashore, a frugal recycling of stock footage shot for previous Corman films, over which Price recites the opening stanzas of the poem. Corman's camera establishes the setting and suggests a

somber mood for the film—a mood soon to be shattered by Lorre’s comic improvisations. When the raven flaps into Price’s study, he “[perches] upon a bust of Pallas just above [Price’s] chamber door,” precisely as does the avian intruder in the poem (Poe 944).

From this point on, however, any similarity to the events of the poem becomes strictly coincidental. The raven’s famous one word comment, “nevermore,” is used only once in the film—at the conclusion, when Price utters the famous line “Quote the Raven, ‘Nevermore’” directly to the audience. In this context the line is utilized for comic, rather than dramatic, effect. In the same vein, the film eschews Poe’s central idea—the grim realization that there will be no end to the speaker’s suffering, nor a reunion with Lenore even in Heaven (945). Within the context of the film there is a specifically antithetical conclusion, for Price’s Craven is ultimately “cured” of his obsession with Lenore after discovering she yet lives, albeit consumed by her avaricious nature.

Also added to the film are suggestions of family dysfunction, a matter wholly absent from Poe’s poem but prevalent in “The Fall of the House of Usher” and explored at great length in the previous Corman/Matheson/Price collaborations. It is significant that Lenore is identified as Craven’s second wife; therefore, she is not the biological parent of his daughter, Estelle. The incorporation of a “wicked stepmother” seems slightly insensitive to modern audiences, as stepparents and “blended” families are more common today than in the early Sixties. Yet Lenore’s stepmother status is evidence that *The Raven* is at least as much a comic variation on the traditional fairy tale as it is an adaptation of Poe. Nevertheless, the fact that Lenore is not really Estelle’s mother

foreshadows her villainous nature and suggests a contest between the two women for Craven's attention and affection—a contest Lenore seems to be winning; in this sense, Lenore recalls Barbara Creed's description of "the monstrous-feminine in terms of the maternal figure" as a threat to "the patriarchal ideology" (47).

This depiction of Lenore is very much at odds with Poe's conception of the character as an idealization of feminine perfection; because the cinematic Lenore is so diametrically opposed to her literary model, it appears Corman and Matheson intend for her to suggest the camp aspects of Poe's too-perfect object of affection. The idealization of Lenore, as alluded to Craven's initially excessive reverence for his second wife, serves as a sharp contrast to Lenore's true nature. As a result of what within the film's comedic context can only be interpreted as a burlesque of the notion of the femme ideal, Lenore becomes (like Madeline Usher, Elizabeth Medina, and Morella Locke before her) a monstrous female who foreshadows the assertive contemporary woman associated with the sexual revolution of the 1960s.

The interplay between Dr. Bedlo and his offspring is also clearly dysfunctional. Rexford announces he has been sent by his mother to keep an eye on his father, an announcement that provokes considerable umbrage on the magician's part. Bedlo makes frequent disparaging remarks about his absent wife (note that the mothers of the magicians' children are not present in this film) and complains that Rexford "is just like [his] mother." Bedlo constantly reiterates his frustration and apparent hatred for his son, who remains doggedly loyal to him regardless of the ill treatment Rexford suffers. "I

thought Jack and Peter managed to turn their scenes into some amusing little pieces,”

Corman recalls of the interaction between Nicholson and Lorre:

This idea wasn't scripted, but it was a Method-type subtext worked out on the set . . . Jack wants nothing in the world more than the love and approval of his father, and Peter wants nothing more than to get rid of his idiot son. So Jack is constantly playing up to Peter, and Peter is constantly pushing him away. (85-86)

Much of the conflict between Rexford and Bedlo is illustrated through Rexford's annoying habit of straightening his father's cloak. According to Jack Nicholson, "The business with Peter's cloak was just actors' devices. I grabbed his cloak . . . just to keep him alive to the fact I was trying to get him out of there. Of course, the good actor that he is, he just reacted to it spontaneously, slapped me and acted out" (qtd. in Corman 86). The ongoing feud within the Bedlo family contrasts ironically with the relationship between Craven and his daughter, which is portrayed as more traditional and loving if somewhat complicated by Craven's lingering obsession with his second wife.

Another Poesque theme explored in *The Raven* is the notion of the beloved but ambiguous (and apparently dead) woman. Like Madeline Usher and Elizabeth Medina before her, Lenore Craven is worshipped by the Price protagonist and proves to be the agent of his undoing; like these female characters, reports of Lenore's death are premature. Yet Lenore is a much more wicked character than Madeline—ostensibly a victim of her brother Roderick's fancies and the hereditary insanity that supposedly afflicts the Usher line—or even Elizabeth, who is metaphorically possessed by the

inherent evil of the Medina household and may be literally under the influence of ghosts. In this instance, Lenore is quite sane and unapologetically evil.

Lenore is among the most overtly sexual of the female characters in the series as well. “With refined good looks and haughty, self-centered nature,” as Steven Thornton observes (241), Craven’s wife first appears wearing the sort of low-cut gown associated with voluptuous females in the Hammer Horror films of the period—a subtle nod to actress Hazel Court’s previous work in *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957), the seminal Hammer offering. Lenore utilizes her feminine wiles and charms in order to secure the attention and support of influential wizards. Although it is not explicitly stated that Lenore used her physical attributes to bewitch Craven, it is logical to assume they played no little role in making the magician fall in love with her. Certainly Lenore is not winning devotion for her chastity or her character; she cheerfully trades her older husband in on an even more elderly, albeit more powerful, wizard. Scarabus thus represents the patriarchal father-husband figure congruent to the early sixteenth century setting of *The Raven*; he is certainly the Grand Master of the *brotherhood* of wizards and magicians—an organization whose known members are uniformly male, which implies the total absence of women in the group as a whole.

Ultimately Lenore must use her own feminine magic to counterbalance the social and sexual barriers that prevent her from being fully represented in the worlds of realism and fantasy dominated by males. As a result, Lenore cunningly performs her gendered role as femme fatale to acquire a degree of power and influence associated with men and thus becoming, in a sense, regendered as a male. Her aggression and frank sexuality

imbue her with substantial power of her own, which tellingly is never fully acknowledged by Craven or Scarabus. Lenore's aggressiveness starkly contrasts with Craven's milder nature, suggesting the wife has incorporated the masculine traits of the husband and replaced him as the dominant partner, maneuvering him into a position of feminine submission. However, the sadomasochistic ramifications of this role reversal are belied by Craven's essential decency and sense of self, which will be reasserted and ultimately reconfirmed.

Carol J. Clover has theorized that the popularity of modern horror films stems in part from their association with "an s/m bang" (223), but sadomasochism informs *The Raven* as well. There is little doubt that Lenore is as amused—and aroused—by sadism as is Elizabeth Medina in *Pit and the Pendulum*. Lenore enthusiastically embraces the gender role reversal implied by her sexual dominance, appropriating masculine aggressiveness while simultaneously compelling the men in her life to assume attitudes of feminine passivity. She takes obvious delight in seeing her husband bound and helpless, smiling cruelly as she tells the shocked wizard that she is "very much alive." She also torments Bedlo, to whom she laughingly remarks, "I liked you better that way," in regard to his bird form.

The most significant expression of Lenore's sadistic nature occurs when Scarabus announces his plan to place Estelle in stocks as a means of forcing Craven to give up his magical secrets. Displaying an excessive excitement at the prospect, Lenore breathlessly asks "are we going to have some torture?" She still laughs as Scarabus remarks to Craven, "Perhaps the sight of your daughter's flesh being seared will clarify your

thinking.” The sadism indicated by this statement represents an element of sexual independence and subversion of gender norms that informs Lenore’s interest in the older man and serves as a foundation for the model of actual and implied dominance and submission—Scarabus as the dominant force, but in reality subservient to his more dominant partner—that the mismatched couple performs.

Dr. Scarabus seems as bewitched by Lenore as is Craven. In fact, Scarabus is as repulsed by his beautiful mistress as he is attracted to her—a common theme in both Poe’s literature and the Price adaptations. When a smirking Lenore boasts about their triumph over her husband, Scarabus remarks, “I’m always fascinated by your lack of scruple” in a tone that mixes dread with admiration. Later he calls her his “precious viper.” In a mocking tone, Lenore reminds her companion of the true nature of their relationship: “You knew what you were getting. Did I ever pretend I came here because of your charm? I came here because of your wealth and power, and in return I gave you (*slight pause*) my company. And if you insist on anything more, I shall leave you as I did Erasmus!”

This speech illustrates Lenore’s completely predatory nature and implies she is actually the dominant party in the relationship. For all his resources, magical and otherwise, the elderly Scarabus cannot resist the lure of a beautiful young woman. Because Lenore threatens to leave him should he “insist on anything more” than her “company,” it can be inferred that there is no chance she will truly fall in love with Scarabus. Perhaps love is not the only thing Scarabus cannot have; Lenore’s speech implies there is no sexual element to their relationship, in the absence of which the only

possible benefit to Scarabus must be the prestige of being accompanied by such an attractive woman. Yet even this boon symbolizes an empty victory for the old sorcerer, for in his lonely castle the couple is devoid of company; therefore, it is rare that he can show off his lovely prize.

Given Scarabus' advanced age, it is likely he is too old to engage in regular or conventional sexual union. After being defeated by the much younger Craven, Scarabus sadly observes, "I'm afraid I just don't have it anymore"—the vague pronoun "it" symbolizing not merely lost magical skills but physical prowess, too. The line is delivered among the collapsed walls of the castle; the ruined house represents the ruin of Dr. Scarabus, his abilities as both man and magician irretrievably compromised by time and the vigor of youth. Ironically he still has Lenore by his side, but under the circumstances she has lost even the nominal attraction of sexual and romantic promise. It is a fitting fate for the true villain of *The Raven*—Lenore herself.

As always in the Poe films, it is the character portrayed by Price that provides *The Raven* with a solid dramatic and thematic foundation upon which the action is balanced. In a striking variation from his usual characterizations, Price plays Craven as weak-willed and indecisive. Unlike the usual Price protagonist, Craven has no master plan or scheme in play; he is truly content to remain in seclusion in his castle, and his retiring attitude contrasts strongly to Bedlo's invective and energy. It is significant that Price plays a character named "Craven," with that word's association with cowardice and weakness. By contrast, Lorre's character's name, "Bedlo," implies lightness and the humor Lorre

brings to the film, while Karloff's name, "Scarabus," contains hard consonant sounds and the root word "scarab"—an Egyptian beetle—that suggest power, age, magic, and evil.

However, Erasmus Craven is without a doubt the hero of the film—an unusual aspect for Price to incorporate into one of his Poe characters. He never develops into a "man of action"; he remains quiet and self-effacing, even during the climactic duel with Scarabus. As a result, an implication of weakness and femininity informs the character, suggesting that he does not conform to gender assumptions. However, the character is ultimately depicted as the embodiment of masculine traits of wisdom, competence, and self-assuredness that confirms Erasmus as a "real man" of intellect even if he is not stereotypically defined as masculine through his physicality.

In a subtle yet significant bit of business, Price bestows his character with a slight but confident smile throughout the showdown with Karloff. The implication is that Craven never seriously doubts the outcome of the duel; he knows his skill far surpasses that of Scarabus, and he feels no need to show off or unduly promote himself. Pride, honor, decency, and an uncompromising sense of self are all elements of Craven's personality expressed in Price's actions and expressions during the eight-minute magical battle.

Of all the characters in *The Raven*, only Craven truly grows and acquires wisdom from his experiences. Scarabus is defeated, and Lenore's power over Craven entirely dissipated; they learn nothing in defeat, for they remain bitter about the failure of their plan. Bedlo remains a trickster character, his loyalty and motivations always suspect even when he becomes Craven's lackey at the film's conclusion. There is no evidence

that Estelle or Rexford have matured, although as innocent youths they have the potential to grow as individuals. Craven, on the other hand, has learned the error of his ways; it was a mistake to withdraw from the world at large and his attendant responsibilities within the brotherhood. As he remarks to his friends following the duel:

Instead of facing life, I turned my back on it. I know now why my father resisted Scarabus: because he knew that one cannot fight evil by hiding from it. Men like Scarabus thrive on the apathy of others; he thrived on mine, and that offends me. By avoiding contact with the brotherhood, I've given him freedom to commit his atrocities unopposed.

Craven's speech suggests more than personal growth on his part. As a statement of personal responsibility, it echoes the famous observation attributed to Edmund Burke that "all that is necessary for evil to succeed is that good men do nothing." Like Burke's quote, Craven's speech applies to government and society as validly as it does to the individual. For the first time in the Poe series, a sociopolitical concept is explicitly expressed and emphasized by Corman and Matheson. Why this concept is so germane to a light project like *The Raven* is unclear (it could very well be a metaphor referring to the Cold War or an allusion to the struggle against fascism in World War II), but its presence in the film contributes significantly to the moral authority of Erasmus Craven, the most purely heroic of Price's Poe protagonists.

Chapter VI

“The Beauties of Terror”: *The Masque of the Red Death* (1964)

By the fall of 1963, the rising costs of film production had convinced the executives at American International Pictures to find cheaper venues to make movies. Having struck a co-production deal with English company Anglo-Amalgamated, AIP sent Roger Corman and Vincent Price abroad for the first of two British-made Poe adaptations, *The Masque of the Red Death*. Released in the summer of 1964, *The Masque of the Red Death* (along with its 1965 successor, *Tomb of Ligeia*) marked a re-invigoration of the Poe cycle on all levels—particularly in regard to Corman and Price’s enthusiasm for the series. As a result, according to Lucy Chase Williams, “*The Masque of the Red Death* [is] regarded as one of the best in the AIP Poe series” (193). The introduction of new screenwriters allows new perspectives on familiar themes from the series, including a different characterization for Price and some radical revisions in the area of gender politics.

Originally published in 1842, “The Masque of the Red Death” remains one of Poe’s most famous and influential tales. In medieval Italy, the decadent Prince Prospero offers his castle as protection for his friends and other nobles from the Red Death, a plague that has “long devastated the country” and identified by “the redness and the horror of blood” (Poe 269). Seven elaborate chambers are prepared, each festooned in different colors, in which the prince hosts an extravagant masked ball. The masquerade is interrupted by the appearance of a mysterious reveler costumed as the Red Death itself; angered and frightened by the repulsively realistic outfit, Prospero decides to kill the

intruder. However, it is Prospero who drops dead upon approaching the stranger, the embodiment of the Red Death; the guests collapse as well, dying “each in the despairing posture of his fall” (273).

Corman’s film is particularly faithful to the story, partially because it lends itself to adaptation more easily than many other Poe tales. As Denis Meikle observes,

‘The Masque of the Red Death’ has a breadth of narrative ideally suited to a feature film. Despite its paltry length in literary form, it has a plot, a setting, a dynamic and a climax: all the elements required of drama. It is also palpably cinematic, with a vivid description of the gaudy décor of the bizarre palace in which the bloody revel takes place. (121)

Nevertheless, Corman felt the story was just too brief to sustain the longer, more elaborate film he had in mind. Therefore, the producer/director decided to supplement Charles Beaumont’s “clever, literate, but not a little ponderous” screenplay with material from another Poe tale, “Hop-Frog” (1849), added at Corman’s request by a second screenwriter, R. Wright Campbell (Meikle 122).

As is Poe’s story, the film is set in medieval Italy, which is being ravaged by a horrifying plague known as the Red Death. Poe’s protagonist (Price) is accurately portrayed as a proud and wicked nobleman who provides shelter and security for his aristocratic guests within the walls of his castle. Yet for the purposes of a full-length motion picture, the Prospero of literature is too static a character; Beaumont’s script, amended by Wright, Corman, and Price himself, develops the prince fully. On film

Prospero is a particularly cruel and hedonistic ruler whose villainy is compounded by the fact he is a committed Satanist.

Except for the ghostly but mute embodiment of the Red Death, Prospero is the only relevant character in the short story. Corman and company add additional characters, including two women of great importance to the prince: his ambitious mistress, Juliana (Hazel Court in her third Poe film for Corman), who zealously pursues her own initiation into the black arts; and Francesca (Jane Asher, a seventeen-year-old newcomer remembered chiefly for her then-boyfriend, Paul McCartney), an innocent peasant girl whom Prospero decides to corrupt. Initially Francesca joins the prince in an attempt to save the lives of her lover, Gino (David Weston), and her father, Ludovico (Nigel Green), who have been imprisoned by Prospero. As the storyline develops, evidence mounts that Francesca is not entirely immune to the attractions of evil Prospero offers.

Certainly Francesca is at first reluctant to spend time in the prince's company. Much older and almost irrationally proud of his evil nature, Prospero is a feudal lord who wields absolute power of life and death over his subjects long before the Red Death appears. The girl is horrified by Prospero's cruelty to his friends as well as her neighbors, whose village he orders burned even as winter approaches. Knowing full well how capricious is her host's temperament, Francesca fears he will decide to kill her or her loved ones simply for amusement. Almost as frightening is Juliana, who senses the younger woman may supplant her in the affections of Prospero and seems willing to do anything to prevent such a scenario from unfolding.

The nature of Francesca's innocence is complex. On the most literal level she is innocent of any crime, being victimized by Prospero simply for trying to defend her lover and father. Francesca is also innocent in terms of knowledge; during one of her many philosophical debates with the worldly prince, she responds to one of his points by weakly admitting "I cannot answer. I have no learning." While Gino is certainly her boyfriend, there is no suggestion that Francesca is sexually active with him; therefore, she is also innocent in the sense that she is a virgin. The threat to Francesca's virginity is constant throughout the film's running time; when she is first spotted by Alfredo (Patrick Magee), Prospero's most lustful associate, he remarks, "can such eyes have ever known sin?" With a slight smile that hints at unspeakable degradations, Prospero replies, "they will, Alfredo. They will!"

One of the most intriguing elements in the film is the way in which Francesca gradually develops as a person. Her innocence slowly fades as she spends time in the company of the more experienced Prospero. Her ignorance is replaced by knowledge, just as the fine gowns seemingly warehoused within the castle replace her grimy peasant dress. Francesca slowly gains the confidence and finally displays the conviction to defend her Christian faith even as Prospero tries to persuade her otherwise. "Can you look around this world and believe in the goodness of a God who rules it?" he asks. "Famine, pestilence, war, disease, and death—they rule this world. If a God of love and life ever did exist, he is long since dead. Someone—something—rules in his place." Yet Francesca never falters, and it is her piety that keeps her safe from harm. For as Prospero

spends more time with her, he begins to suspect that she represents what little good still exists in a world scourged by the Red Death.

Francesca's faith is tested, of course, and she is tempted by Prospero's worldview. On the most fundamental level, the girl is ignorant but not stupid: she realizes the material benefits that would come her way if she became the prince's consort. Francesca understands that Juliana enjoys fine clothes, jewelry, and food, as well as Prospero's protection in a time and place where life is cheap (particularly female life) and dangers of all stripes are constant. A powerful, learned man such as Prospero is attractive to a degree, physically and psychologically (it is no accident that Gino, played by the deliberately [?] wooden Weston, is portrayed as ignorant, impoverished, and dull). More than anything else, however, Francesca is tempted by the sheer lack of limitations a life with Prospero promises. When Prospero tells Francesca "I will initiate you into understanding," he suggests an understanding that includes more than an awareness of sin and debauchery. The life of the mind—a life of art, poetry, and philosophy—would be denied to a mere peasant in medieval Italy. At his side, Francesca would experience all the beauty and mystery and possibility in the world beyond her simple village—that is, if the prince himself understood the world's potential.

Consumed by the darkness of his soul, Prospero has embraced the false promise of Satan. Seeing only the greed, hatred and violence in the world, the prince simply cannot believe that anything better lies beyond the walls of his castle—or of material existence itself. Wealth, power, and education offer Prospero no pleasure; although he exploits his station in life throughout the film, he gains no satisfaction from it. In spite of

these conditions, Prospero is nevertheless a tragic hero, for he still has the potential to be a great man.

Regardless of his protests to the contrary, the Satanist subconsciously reveres goodness, or at least the promise of goodness. This is why Prospero spares a peasant child from the slaughter meted out to her fellow villagers and ultimately why he protects and nurtures Francesca. In the few innocent people he meets, Prospero sees the good he no longer believes resides within himself. Ironically, Prospero transfers experience to Francesca, yet ironically she resurrects a hint of his long-extinguished innocence.

This transference between the principal characters is symbolized by the chaste kiss Francesca places on the older man's cheek before she flees the crimson-robed figure of the Red Death (who agrees to spare her at Prospero's request). For Prospero, "the kiss seems to offer an eleventh hour antidote to the corrosive cynicism he has energetically preached throughout" (Rigby 105). Although the gesture is ostensibly made to express the girl's appreciation for her life, it also epitomizes her acknowledgement of the remnants of good within Prospero's soul and the promise of what their unconsummated relationship might have been.

Prospero and Francesca's complex relationship of innocence and experience is not the only irony that abounds in *The Masque of the Red Death*. Fittingly, both Prospero and Juliana are rendered naïve by the very worldliness they so proudly display. Prospero believes he understands the true nature of existence and that the Red Death is his master, Satan. When the Red Death (John Westbrook) insists he is not Satan, Prospero ignorantly insists that "there is no other God—Satan killed him." To this the Red Death

responds with an allusion to Milton: “each man creates his own God for himself—his own heaven, his own hell.” Increasingly frantic at his growing awareness of how poorly he has understood the nature of existence, Prospero insists upon removing the Red Death’s mask (note the pun on “masque”), only to find the demonic figure’s face is his own. Prospero attempts to flee, but the Red Death pursues, asking the prince, “why should you be afraid to die? Your soul has been dead a long time.” As he expires in a torrent of blood, Prospero finally understands that his worldview and misplaced faith in evil represent the colossal folly of his Satanic beliefs; as a tragic hero, he must have an epiphany, a moment of clarity before he dies.

Prospero’s fate is foreshadowed by Juliana’s doom. Having begged her lover to initiate her fully into the practice of Satanism, Juliana decides to pursue the matter on her own. She offers herself as the bride of Satan, branding her own breast with an inverted cross in a scene suffused with an atmosphere of sexual horror. Corman depicts Juliana’s initiation in a delirious dream sequence, during which various shamanistic figures torment her. When she awakens, Juliana triumphantly announces that she “has tasted the beauties of terror.” She believes her place as the devil’s pride provides security and comfort. Yet her triumph is short-lived; Prospero tells his consort there is one more step in her initiation, at which point she is attacked and killed by his falcon. Later the prince says to his guests, “I beg you, do not mourn for Juliana. She has just married a friend of mine.” Price delivers this line with his usual sardonic glee, suggesting Prospero’s wicked sense of irony in regard to his mistress’ demise yet forecasting his own moment of ironic epiphany to come.

Juliana is an interesting character, ostensibly a villainess yet also a victim of Prospero's hegemony and of the repressive society in which the film takes place. That she so enthusiastically follows the dark beliefs of the prince does not change the fact that her opportunities as a woman in medieval Europe would be limited at best. Beyond the walls of Prospero's castle, Juliana would enjoy few rights except as the wife or mistress of another male aristocrat. Her acceptance of Satanism is a tacit admission of the constrictions the world places on her because of her gender, not just a signal that her morality and intellect have been compromised by Prospero's nihilistic philosophy. Intriguingly, it is Juliana's assertion of independence—the quest to complete her study of Satanism—that dooms her. Apparently even within the construct of Satanic philosophy, women cannot be allowed independent initiative and must remain under the control of a transgressive but nevertheless patriarchal system.

Juliana's conflict with Francesca has less to do with her affection for Prospero than it does with her anxiety over losing her status. Juliana fears being replaced by Francesca, in whom perhaps she sees a reflection of herself. Corman never firmly establishes Juliana's history, but considering that she and Francesca are both beautiful redheads, it is possible Juliana was herself an innocent young woman corrupted by Prospero. As Steven Thornton puts it, "one suspects [Juliana] is observing a vision of herself from the not-too-distant past" when she gazes upon Francesca (230). Thus the appearance of Francesca results in another variation of the romantic triangles that are emblematic of the Corman-helmed films. In this context, the Price character is the apex of a relationship with two women; for once he does not contend with a male rival, for it is

the women who are in conflict for Prospero's attention and good will. The triangle is another representation of the motif of innocence contrasted with experience, and once again innocence is the key to survival while experience is the path to destruction.

Like Corman's previous Poe adaptations, *The Masque of the Red Death* contains numerous references to unusual sexual practices and obsessions. Although for once the Poe story does not contain any recognizable suggestion of romantic/sexual transgression, by the time the film was produced such notions had become central tenets of the series' iconography; therefore, sexual deviation must be present even if it must be imported to the plot. Touches of sadism and masochism are hinted at throughout the film. Juliana's branding is a form of self-mutilation and a symbol of ownership often referenced in sadomasochistic behavior. Prospero constantly ridicules and insults his friends, deriving some kind of perverse fulfillment through their humiliation. In one of the film's most disturbing sequences, the prince insists that his guests emulate "the lives and loves of the animals," a bizarre humiliation redolent with suggestions of bestiality.

In a sequence that makes manifest the devaluation of women only suggested by the presence of Juliana and Francesca, Prospero considers the pleas of Scarlatti (Paul Whitsun-Jones), a guest who has arrived too late to enjoy the prince's protection. When Prospero refuses him admittance, Scarlatti begs for sanctuary from the plague and offers his wife (Jean Lodge) as a bribe. "I've already had that doubtful pleasure," Prospero sneers at the prospect of having sex with the married woman. This scene is noteworthy for the way Scarlatti's wife mutely stands next to her husband and meekly acquiesces to the idea of being traded like property—although it must be admitted that Prospero is their

only hope to avoid the Red Death, and so her co-operation can be construed as a logical means of self-preservation. In another example of his cruel sense of humor, Prospero finally agrees to spare the Scarlattis from the ravages the Red Death; he orders his archers to fire upon Scarlatti, then tosses a dagger to Scarlatti's wife so she may kill herself—a noteworthy and cruelly ironic gesture that acknowledges the woman's right to autonomy only if she wields it for the purpose of self-destruction.

The film establishes that Alfredo is at least Prospero's equal in decadence; at one point, Prospero remarks, "I'm sure you wonder about every female in my household." Later the lascivious Alfredo displays particular interest in Esmeralda (Verina Greenlaw), the diminutive companion of the dwarf, here renamed Hop Toad (Skip Martin). Alfredo's unusual attention to Esmeralda implies he is sexually excited by her dwarfism. Because Corman cast a child (whose voice was later dubbed by an adult actress) in the role of Esmeralda, Alfredo's attraction to her strongly suggests pedophilia. This idea is further underscored because young Greenlaw wears adult makeup—heavy rouge, eyeliner, and lipstick—in an unsuccessful attempt to make her appear older. Apparently Corman and his associates could not locate an appropriate female dwarf in all of Great Britain, thus requiring the use of a child actress. As a result, modern audiences familiar with the sexualized images of young girls in films like Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) and Louis Malle's *Pretty Baby* (1978) and aware of tragedies like the Jon Benet Ramsay murder are acutely distressed by Alfredo's unwholesome taste for eroticized children.

Alfredo's fate is grim, albeit richly deserved; it is imported from "Hop-Frog," one of Poe's more perverse tales of revenge. Enraged by Alfredo's abuse of Esmeralda, the grotesque dwarf Hop Toad plots a hideous revenge, chaining the ape-costumed Alfredo to a chandelier and setting him afire. The onlookers are too horrified to prevent the dwarf and his companion from escaping the castle; instead they are transfixed by the "fetid, blackened, hideous, and indistinguishable mass" (Poe 509) that remains of Alfredo. Prospero himself seems greatly amused by Hop Toad's "entertaining jest"; the prince announces a reward for the dwarf before ordering his guards to "clear [Alfredo's smoking remains] out of the way. How can my guests be expected to dance around *that*?" Although borrowed from a different story, the scenes with Hop Toad fit seamlessly into the overall narrative and provide another example of an innocent female (Esmeralda) who survives the destruction of an experienced male (Alfredo). The reiteration of this theme is particularly significant because it represents a revision of the usual male-female relationship in the Poe series, one in which the vengeful woman ostensibly seems to be the villain or monster of the piece.

The Masque of the Red Death met with the best overall reception of any entry in the Poe cycle since *House of Usher*. According to James Robert Parish and Steven Whitney, the picture made more than \$1.4 million dollars in North American rentals alone (118). Perhaps even more exciting to Roger Corman was the enormously favorable critical reaction, especially in Europe. A critic in *Sight and Sound* observed,

Corman's first British film . . . is strikingly handsome, with vast, impressive sets, fluid camerawork, and majestically tasteful [color].

Moreover, none of this is the work of Corman's usual collaborators, but of British technicians . . . who have succeeded in making a refreshingly un-British (or at any rate non-Hammer) British horror movie. (qtd. in Rigby 103)

While Corman did indeed work with a predominantly British cast and crew, one crucial "usual collaborator" did accompany the filmmaker to England, providing an aesthetic connection to the Hollywood-lensed films: Daniel Haller, the imaginative art director who had done such a brilliant job dressing up the low-budget sets on the previous Poe adaptations. Now working with leftover elements from such earlier British productions as *Becket*, Haller devised a far more opulent castle for Prince Prospero than the piles occupied by Roderick Usher, Nicholas Medina, or Erasmus Craven. Similarly, Laura Nightingale's elaborate costumes far surpass those featured in earlier AIP films in elegance, design, and verisimilitude. The most impressive technical achievement is the cinematography of future director Nicholas Roeg, whose compositions subtly reference medieval woodcuts depicting the Black Plague. Roeg's efforts "won him a Best Cinematography award at a major European film festival" (Corman 87). No less an authority than Stephen King acclaims *The Masque of the Red Death* as "interesting and rather beautiful" (190).

Corman had planned to shoot *Red Death* immediately after *Usher*, but a threatened lawsuit by rival producer Alex Gordon, who had planned to star Price in a version of the story as early as 1958, postponed the project. Furthermore, Corman feared that his interpretation of the demonic Red Death would be too derivative of Bergman's

conception of Death in *The Seventh Seal*, a film Corman greatly admired. Corman's film is certainly informed by the Bergman classic, with the figure of the Red Death appearing in surprising places and reading tarot cards instead of playing chess (the favorite pastime of Bergman's Death). Regardless of its sources of inspiration, *The Masque of the Red Death* is rich in symbolism and style. Alain Silver and James Ursini observe that

Death's role in Corman's film is much more elaborate [than in *The Seventh Seal*]. His two-fold role is that of destroyer and liberator. To . . . Prospero and his aristocratic guests . . . he is their own reflection, their own hell—an inferno they have created through self-indulgence, callousness, and arrogance Concurrently, Death is a liberating force for the innocent victims of Prospero's depredations, freeing the hero and heroine who have been captured and tortured by the prince to satisfy his debauched desires. (*More* 52)

The film would not hold together without a strong cast anchored by Vincent Price. The actor varies his line readings, delivering some dialogue with a dripping irony and sarcasm and others with a chilling edge accented by his wickedly gleaming eyes. Given Price's tendency to overplay such characters, it is a tribute to his dedication to the project and Corman's careful direction that Prince Prospero never becomes a camp stereotype. As Mark Clark observes, "Price oozes oily charm and radiates icy indifference to human suffering" yet conveys "an undercurrent of pathos," resulting in a performance that shows the actor "at his most colorful, energetic, and entertaining" (96-97).

Ultimately *The Masque of the Red Death* maintains its high critical standing even after the passage of more than forty years. Technically impressive and graced with several excellent performances, the film demonstrates a thematic richness even greater than its predecessors in the Corman/Price/Poe series. By avoiding cheap scares and infusing the source material with philosophical musings on gender roles, sexual obsession, and the possibility of enduring good in a world beset with chaotic evil, Corman's production honors Poe's tale and brilliantly succeeds in suggesting that "Darkness and Decay and the Red Death [hold] illimitable dominion over all" (Poe 273).

Chapter VII

“Nor Lie In Death Forever”: *The Tomb of Ligeia* (1965)

In his landmark 1973 survey *A Heritage of Horror*, David Pirie pronounces *The Tomb of Ligeia* (1965) “perhaps the more important of Corman’s two English Poe films,” praises Robert Towne’s “highly literate script,” and declares Vincent Price’s performance to rank among his greatest (190). According to Lucy Chase Williams, the original notice in the *London Times* deemed Roger Corman’s latest Poe adaptation worthy of “without absurdity be[ing] spoken of in the same breath as Cocteau’s *Orphee* (1950)” (198). On the other hand, Denis Meikle calls the movie one of Corman’s “lesser works of Gothic pretension” (133). In *English Gothic* (2000), Jonathan Rigby concludes that in spite of its strong script, production values, and principal performances, “the film is also rather [slowly] paced and for a long time doesn’t seem to be going anywhere” (117). Of all the films in the Poe cycle, none is more critically divisive than the final entry, as Michael R. Pitts observes: “many enthusiasts [feel] this [is] the best of the Price-Corman-Poe series, while others [find] it colorful but short on plot” (372-373). Whether critics praise or damn the final cinematic collaboration of Corman, Price, and Poe, *The Tomb of Ligeia* is visually rich and symbolically stunning—perhaps moreso than any of its predecessors, particularly in its depiction of gender subversion.

Once again Corman and his screenwriter were required to develop a feature-length narrative to graft onto a brief Poe tale. Originally published in 1838, “Ligeia” features another of Poe’s typically unnamed narrators—suffering from a “memory so impaired it ought to disqualify him from narrating” (Kendrick 177)--caught up in yet

another obsessive love affair laced with supernatural elements. In this case, the storyteller describes “the Lady Ligeia,” his mysterious first wife who insists, in the words of seventeenth century English philosopher Joseph Glanvill, that man dies “only through the weakness of his feeble will” (654). In spite of her own potent will, Ligeia sickens and dies, and the narrator takes a second wife, the Lady Rowena Trevanion of Tremaine (note the author’s use of alliteration here, borrowed from one of his favorite poetic techniques). Soon, however, Rowena falls ill and expires; her body rises from the deathbed, her features transformed into those of Ligeia, whose will seems more powerful than death after all. As with many Poe stories, “Ligeia” ends without resolution.

“Ligeia” is in many particulars reminiscent of Poe’s “Morella,” which while written *earlier* did not appear in print until two years *later*. Both stories involve women versed in arcane and mystical knowledge returning from the grave; in both cases their spirits seem to possess the bodies of other women. Yet “Ligeia” is better developed, involving comparatively fewer stretches of credibility (such as “Morella” narrator Locke’s unlikely refusal to name his daughter until she is ten) and a greater focus on a central theme—the idea that sufficient willpower will conquer death itself. Certainly *The Tomb of Ligeia* is a more polished film than the “Morella” episode of *Tales of Terror*, although *Tales* was produced earlier and introduces more specific notions of spiritual possession than either of Poe’s stories— notions that seem to have been liberally borrowed for *Tomb*.

Thanks to the brevity of Poe’s tale, Towne’s screenplay manages to incorporate essentially all of its details, including a paraphrase of the Glanville quote that introduces

“Ligeia” and the interest in Egyptian mythology and culture demonstrated by the title character. For example, Poe refers to the Egyptian deity Ashtophet, the god of “marriages ill-omened” (654), and the reference is paraphrased by the film’s protagonist, here christened Verden Fell (played, as always, by Vincent Price). Towne’s script also depicts the Lady Rowena (Elizabeth Shepherd) expiring and reviving several times before her possession by Ligeia (also played by Shepherd), a bit of action taken directly from Poe’s text. The recreation of such details in the film is a comparatively minor matter, yet Towne’s fealty demonstrates his and Corman’s desire to maintain as faithful an adaptation of Poe as possible. Such fealty to the source material is particularly significant given the tremendous number of additions necessary to develop a feature-length film.

Towne’s additions include the presence of a black cat—apparently to recall Poe’s story of that name and the episode of *Tales of Terror* it inspired. The nameless cat seems to be Ligeia’s familiar and may be possessed by her restless spirit. It rarely misses an opportunity to startle Verden’s new love interest; the animal screeches at the very moment Rowena mutters the dead woman’s name, which startles Rowena’s horse so badly it throws her to the ground. During the film, the cat scratches Rowena’s face when she attempts her first kiss with Verden, nearly causing her to plunge to her death in the bell tower, and attacks her locked door with supernatural fury.

Throughout the film, Towne and Corman offer bits of feline symbolism. Early on, Verden argues with the local parson (Ronald Adam), who tries to deny Ligeia’s burial in the abbey’s consecrated ground. Suddenly the black cat leaps upon Ligeia’s coffin,

stunning the funeral party into silence; Fell sardonically inquires if the cat made off with their tongues. Rowena demonstrates her “catty” nature on several occasions; like a cat, she playfully swats Fell’s dark glasses, yanking them off his face and causing him to collapse in pain due to his “morbid sensitivity” to sunlight. Later Verden attempts to choke Rowena, apparently while he is consumed in some psychotic reverie. After regaining his composure, he remarks, “I can’t very well send you off shivering like a frightened kitten.” Elsewhere Verden orders Kenrick (Oliver Johnston) to kill the cat, but saucers of milk to sustain the beast keep turning up. The destruction of the animal seems almost impossible, suggesting the “nine lives” cats enjoy according to folklore.

Perhaps most significantly, Towne’s script acknowledges the many associations between felines and females in Western culture. The cultural assumption that women and cats are mysterious, complicated, and independent is clearly present in Towne’s screenplay, for both Rowena and Ligeia demonstrate similarly catlike personalities. It is no accident the feline in *The Tomb of Ligeia* is a black cat; Towne and Corman are clearly counting on the superstition that black cats are bad luck and are associated with witches to build audience tension. The presence of a black cat also serves as a suggestion that Ligeia is herself a witch, and certainly it seems possible that her incredible will power is augmented by supernatural means—in effect, witchcraft.

Eventually it is revealed that Ligeia had mastered the art of hypnosis and cast a hypnotic “spell” on Verden before her death. Although hypnotism itself is now generally associated with science, at the time of the film’s setting it was perceived as some kind of magical manifestation. The use of mesmerism also alludes to the third episode of *Tales*

of Terror, “The Case of M. Valdemar,” which also involves hypnotism and a conflict of psychic wills. In any event, this “scientific” explanation of Ligeia’s ability to control her husband posthumously is undermined by the apparently legitimate supernatural phenomena that take place during the film.

From the very first, eyes and vision play important thematic roles in the film. This is a natural thematic development from the original story; at one point, Poe’s narrator reveals that it is Ligeia’s eyes that so fascinate him:

The expression of the eyes of Ligeia! How for long hours have I pondered upon it! . . . What was it . . . which lay far within the pupils of my beloved? What was it? I was possessed with a passion to discover. Those eyes! Those large, those shining, those divine orbs! They became to me twin stars of Leda, and I to them devoutest of astrologers. (656)

The cinematic protagonist demonstrates an interest in eyes every bit as intense as his literary antecedent. When Verden shows one of his waxen copies of an Egyptian bust to his childhood friend, Christopher (John Westbrook), he suddenly exclaims, “The eyes! They confound me!” Of course, Fell isn’t just talking about the statuary—he is referring to Ligeia as well.

The significance of visual symbolism is recognizable in several ways. On one level, the beauty of Ligeia’s eyes in the story alludes to Poe’s usual depiction of beautiful and highly idealized females. However, Ligeia’s eyes also suggest the antithesis of Poesque idealization because they have frozen Verden in an emotional stasis of her own creation. The freezing power of Ligeia’s gaze recalls the Greek legend of Medusa, who

could petrify men by turning them to stone. As Barbara Creed notes, Sigmund Freud theorizes Medusa as a symbol of female genitalia, which in turn represents “the monstrous-feminine as constructed within and by a patriarchal and phallogentric ideology [associated with] the problem of sexual difference and castration” (36). Thus Verden is simultaneously petrified by Ligeia, suggesting a state of constant sexual arousal within her thrall, and castrated by his inability to fully engage on an emotional (and at times physical) level with Rowena.

By endowing Ligeia with such an overwhelming hypnotic gaze, Corman and Towne imbue the character with a powerful symbol of sexual aggression and a pointed parody of the masculine gendered gaze. This symbol is particularly potent within a visual medium such as film; indeed, the production largely depends on the filmmakers’ presumption that the audience will unconsciously recognize the conflict and danger represented by the character’s act of looking. In this context, *The Tomb of Ligeia* also exemplifies Laura Mulvey’s definition of the cinematic gaze as inherently male, recognizing that “the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the [castration] anxiety it originally signified” (2188).

The striking nature of Ligeia’s eyes suggests an iconoclasm beyond beauty and sexual allure, yet her greatest strength is her sheer force of will, which in turn represents her challenge to the patriarchy. Ligeia appropriates a masculine trait by possessing such mental strength, effectively re-gendering her as male. This re-gendering is also used in Corman’s film to suggest another appropriated masculine trait, sexual aggression. The

potential to cheat death suggested by Ligeia's abilities represents a power absent among men; only a willful female, apparently, can re-establish herself after death.

In the funeral scene, Ligeia's eyes pop open when the cat jumps on her coffin. Fell explains the incident away as "a nervous contraction—nothing more," but the staring eyes nevertheless foreshadow Ligeia's undead state. The intense blackness of the cat's appearance is relieved only by its baleful green eyes.

Most significantly, "Verden Fell's eyes—the windows to his soul—remain hidden behind his dark glasses whenever he stands in sunlight (a visual symbol for purity and goodness)" (Lampley 221). Even when he is indoors and removes his glasses, Fell's eyes remain squinted, implying physical limitations to his sight equivalent to his inability to understand what Ligeia's baleful influence is doing to him. Finally, Fell is literally blinded by the cat during their final confrontation within the blazing abbey; helplessly stumbling about the burning room (significantly, the secret bedchamber he shares with Ligeia's corpse), he embodies Mulvey's idea of a male castrated as a result of gazing (2180).

Roger Corman praises Robert Towne's ability to "understand the psychology of characterization" and "conceive a world entirely inhabited by tormented characters" (qtd. in Silver and Ursini, *Roger* 226). The script for *The Tomb of Ligeia* conveys a strong indication of how characters are tortured for their inability to comprehend fully what they are witnessing. Certainly Towne's screenplay incorporates crucial lines of dialogue, such as Verden's comment that "your vision is more limited than mine" to Rowena, who seems wholly unable to appreciate the danger of loving him. To put it another way,

What characters see—or fail to see—is of considerable importance. When Lord Trevanion [Derek Francis] arrives to check on his daughter, he is more concerned with the rare fox he's captured. Trevanion fails to acknowledge his child's injuries, and he assumes Fell is a doctor simply because the bespectacled stranger is bandaging Rowena's foot. Later, Verden fails to recognize Rowena on two occasions, as his perceptions are muddled by Ligeia's evil influence. (Lampley 220)

It is very interesting that the story unfolds in nineteenth century England—1821 is given as the year of Ligeia's death. The social, sexual, and political opportunities for women would therefore be very limited, and both Ligeia and Rowena can be seen as rebels against the patriarchal system in which they exist. In fact, the emphasis on will power in the film underscores the primary form of rebellion both women practice: they are both stubborn beings who demonstrate highly unusual strength of will, at least for women of the period. Ligeia's will is directed towards preserving her existence on a literal level; her demand for life inspires her ominous epitaph, “nor lie in death forever.”

Rowena's will is focused on a slightly more figurative preservation of existence—her independence in a world run by men. Her own father asks rhetorically, “Willful little bitch, ain't she? Hell to be married to.” This line is especially telling in regard to the repressive conditions in which the Lady of Tremaine finds herself. Other comments about Rowena's willfulness are littered throughout the film; at one point Verden tells her, “Willful? You don't even know the meaning of the word,” a subtle admission that he believes Ligeia's will is stronger than Rowena's.

It is significant that Ligeia embraces the religion of ancient Egypt, which includes powerful female deities such as Isis and a materialistic view of the afterlife that implies a false death for the first Mrs. Fell. Furthermore, her interest in Egyptian mythology represents her preference for a non-Christian orthodoxy, an orderly society at least nominally free of the institutionalized sexism and philosophical dogma of that period in English history between the Regency and the Victorian era. Rowena's preference for Verden's company implies, in part, a preference for his decidedly non-traditional modes of behavior. By the same token, Rowena's jilting of Christopher symbolizes her rejection of a "proper" husband and subsequently submissive role in marriage.

The tendency to rebel against "normal" society is influenced partially by the unconventional sexualities exhibited by Verden Fell and his two wives. Verden's obsession with Ligeia implies that his subjugation to her will is at least partially sexual in nature. Certainly Ligeia's dominant tendencies are apparent in her deathbed statement to Verden: "I will always be your wife—your only wife." When it is revealed that Verden keeps Ligeia's peculiarly well-preserved corpse (another conceit on loan from the "Morella" segment of *Tales of Terror*) in a secret bedchamber, it is obvious that Fell has practiced necrophilia with the remains of his first wife. Especially disturbing is the fact that when Rowena discovers Ligeia's remains, the corpse's arms are specifically positioned as if to embrace another person—which, of course, is precisely what has been happening.

Rowena's romantic and sexual impulses are at first glance unremarkable, but a careful reading of her scenes and dialogue reveals the subtle emotional and physical

yearnings that propel her into Verden Fell's arms and thus the center of the story.

Already constrained by the rules of society, Rowena seems unwilling to settle for the conventional sexual life marriage to Christopher promises. It is Fell's dark appearance and mysterious behavior that convey his unconventional personality and promises an unconventional sexuality as well, an anticipation of Linda Williams' claim that "the monster's power is one of sexual difference from the normal male" and evidence "of a frightening potency precisely where the normal male would perceive a lack" (20).

During one of their early conversations, Rowena tells Verden, "you make me want to offer *you* something" when he asks if he can offer her refreshments. This remark indicates Rowena's bold sexual and romantic nature and reveals how far she has already fallen for her dark beau. The reply also suggests the sexual frankness that formal Victorian social customs repressed, particularly among females. As Steven Thornton claims, Rowena's willfulness and adult sexuality "make her an uncharacteristically respectable (and admirable) genre film heroine" of horror cinema's Silver Age (238).

Yet whatever carnal delights Fell seems likely to share are almost entirely frustrated by his obsession with Ligeia. Verden and Rowena marry, then go off on an extended honeymoon, during which their marriage is presumably consummated. Significantly, Verden seems happier and even ceases wearing his shaded glasses, which represent blocked vision and diminished sexual autonomy. After their return to the abbey, however, Verden refuses to spend nights with his wife, cloistering her in a separate bedroom. Verden has regressed, resubmitting to Ligeia's erotic dominance and the "castration anxieties, the underlying threat of nonphallic female sexuality, and the

power in sexual difference” (Hollinger 300) his first wife represents. When it is discovered that there is no death certificate and thus no legal proof that Ligeia is dead, Rowena complains about her lot to Christopher: “I eat alone, I sleep alone, and that’s how it should be. After all, I’m not his wife, am I?” The nature of her frustration is thus physical as well as emotional.

In his last performance for Roger Corman, Vincent Price is more restrained and subtle than in any of the earlier Poe adaptations. Costumed in all black, complete with curly black hair and black-lensed glasses, Price’s Verden Fell is striking and mysterious, a precursor to the modern “Goth” fashion. In fact, this dark-clad character functions as a visual bookend to the series of Poe adaptations, since Fell “looks like a photographic negative of white-haired Roderick Usher,” according to Bruce Lanier Wright (125). Price shaved his trademark moustache to play Fell, another allusion to his portrayal of Roderick Usher (and a subtle nod to the actor’s well-regarded turn as the protagonist in 1946’s *Dragonwyck*, his most relevant experience as a Gothic hero prior to the Poe series). The actor uses his velvety voice beautifully, offering a seductive purr that, coupled with his eccentric appearance, makes him seem believably fascinating to a “normal” young woman like Rowena.

Price has been praised—and often condemned—for his barnstorming performances in his horror films, acting turns that are often considered over-the-top and ultimately “campy.” Here, however, his refusal to overplay his part keeps lines such as “she will not die because she is not dead—to me” realistic and straight. Even when he must suggest Fell’s crumbling mental state through a frantic monologue, Price manages

to deliver potentially campy dialogue such as “if only I could lay open my own brain as easily as I did that vegetable! What rot would be freed from its gray leaves!” with a sort of excited gravity that prevents the lines from inducing laughter.

Yet for all Price’s skill and sensitivity, his efforts would be blunted if he were cast opposite a weak co-star. In the dual roles of Rowena and Ligeia, Elizabeth Shepherd provides the horror star with his most worthy acting foil, successfully creating two distinct characters in what becomes the finest performance from a female actress in the entire Poe series—a stunning achievement given the previous work of Hazel Court and Barbara Steele. Shepherd’s performance as a being divided between two personas, both of which are sexuality aggressive, exemplifies Rhona J. Berenstein’s theory that

Monsters do not fit neatly with a model of human sexuality. Instead, they propose a paradigm of sexuality in which eros and danger, sensuality and destruction, human and inhuman, male and female blur, overlap, and coalesce. In this schema, sexuality and identity remain murky matters, steeped in border crossings and marked by fuzzy boundaries. (27)

Like Price, Shepherd possesses a physical appearance that is more striking than conventionally attractive, a trait that suggests elements of alienation and oddity within their respective characters. Also like her co-star, Shepherd is gifted with especially strong vocal abilities; her naturally deep voice suggests Rowena’s latent sexuality but remains soft and kindly. However, the actress adopts a slightly harder-edged voice when Ligeia’s personality overwhelms Rowena, suggesting the evil and domineering nature of the first Mrs. Fell. Jonathan Rigby identifies Shepherd’s ability to “[create] a petrifying

effect in a scene, where, under hypnosis, she suddenly switches from reliving her childhood to speaking in the braying, masterful tones of Ligeia” (116).

What in Poe’s hands is essentially a three-character story becomes a multi-character film, of whom six are especially relevant. In addition to Poe’s three characters, the film introduces Christopher Gough, a childhood acquaintance of the protagonist (an idea swiped from *House of Usher*) who serves as the Trevanion family lawyer and is Rowena’s intended husband; Lord Trevanion, Rowena’s comically boorish father; and Kenrick, Fell’s faithful old servant (yet another idea derived from *House of Usher*). The presence of these new characters opens the storyline up and allows Towne and Corman to craft more dramatic tension and develop additional thematic concerns.

Throughout the Poe cycle, the nominal heroes of the individual films are uniformly dull and largely ineffectual, evidencing the essential truth of Roy Huss’ assertion that “the horror film genre seems to reserve no place for the dashing young savior-hero” (qtd. in Berenstein 5). Beginning with Philip Winthrop in *House of Usher* and continuing with Francis Bernard (*Pit and the Pendulum*), Dr. James (“The Case of M. Valdemar” segment of *Tales of Terror*), Rexford Bedlo (*The Raven*), and Gino (*The Masque of the Red Death*), each of the “romantic leads” in the series is an unexceptional character who comes across as forgettable and sometimes incompetent, even in situations wherein the “hero” actually defeats the threat at hand. As a result, there is an implication of ineffectual sexuality among these allegedly romantic leads that serves to underscore the charisma and allure of Price’s protagonists. To a degree these characters appear weak because they are portrayed by actors of dubious merit; indeed, of all the romantic leads in

the Poe adaptations, only one is played by an actor of note: Jack Nicholson as Rexford, who in any case is *supposed* to be somewhat dim-witted, a circumstance that justifies Nicholson's deliberately wooden performance.

As Christopher, John Westbrook turns in arguably the strongest performance in this sort of role, even though he spends most of his time impotently grimacing at Price and Shepherd. Yet Westbrook is a much stronger actor than most of his predecessors, and he uses pained expressions and tense posture to convey the barely masked rage and disappointment within the attorney's heart. The character is a man of reason and logic, a lawyer who by training and inclination must deal with the realities of the material world. Therefore, Christopher is uncomfortable with emotions, romantic or otherwise, and wholly incapable of dealing with supernatural phenomena. Westbrook's expressions, gestures, and body language expertly convey this notion; later, the actor subtly suggests the lawyer's rising sense of triumph when Gough arrives at the abbey to check on Rowena late in the film. Here Gough seems excited, almost happy, at the prospect of unraveling the Fell marriage and perhaps winning back the hand—if not the heart—of his erstwhile companion. Yet even at this moment of apparent victory, Christopher can only comfort Rowena with sober logic, not romantic declarations: "I can't promise all will be well, but it will be done with soon."

Gough's practical turn of mind is nevertheless very useful during the film. It is Gough who discovers that there is no death certificate for Ligeia and consequently establishes, as he tells Verden, "Legally Ligeia is still alive—still your wife!" Gough also reveals that the abbey and much of the estate is still registered in Ligeia's name, so

Verden's plan to sell the abbey and take Rowena away is hobbled. The attorney is also inquisitive enough to wonder exactly who is in Ligeia's grave, so he hires workmen to help him disinter her coffin. When he exposes Ligeia's body to a flame, it melts; Gough therefore establishes that a waxen effigy, apparently crafted by Fell, lies in Ligeia's grave.

Unfortunately for Christopher Gough, he can never match Verden Fell in Lady Rowena's affections, much less surpass him. Because he is such a rationalist, Gough can never really participate in the Romantic world of obsessive emotion and intense imagination that Fell represents to Rowena. Even more importantly, Gough could never accept the embodiment—the visualization—of sexualized power exchange that informs the relationship between Rowena and Verden (and Ligeia as well, to complete the romantic triangle). This world of Poesque mystery and imagination is irresistible to Rowena, for it represents freedom from the hyper-rational and practical life symbolized by Christopher and Lord Trevanion. Rowena has already confounded the expectations of fiancée and her father in that she is not the typical quiet and proper wife-to-be; her discomfort with the real world and her role in it does not end simply because Fell dies in the abbey conflagration. Thus the ambiguous expression on Rowena's face at the film's close doesn't merely suggest her continued possession by Ligeia's spirit; it also implies that she cannot—or will not—return to the conventional life against which she was already rebelling when she first met Verden. In a sense, Christopher has not really saved Rowena at all, proving that "horror's heroes often fail miserably in their efforts to save the day" (Berenstein 91).

The presence of the aging Lord Trevanion and elderly servant Kenrick adds another layer of psychosocial symbolism to *The Tomb of Ligeia*. These representatives of established patriarchal order exist to both protect their charges from excessive sexuality and to subtly encourage an exploration of unconventional desires. At first glance, Trevanion appears to be something of a lout, a wealthy and titled man who is not really the refined gentleman generally associated with the British aristocracy. Living only for his foxhunts and other material diversions, Rowena's father seems as unaware and unappreciative of a more metaphysical conception of the world as is Christopher, whom Trevanion clearly considers an appropriate and socially acceptable potential son-in-law. Yet there is in Trevanion's boisterous, comical attitude a suggestion of the same distaste for social convention his daughter displays. Lord Trevanion seems uneasy, or at least impatient, with the expectations and protocols of his station. On some level, Rowena has inherited her independent and contrary nature from her father, a notion further underscored each time he inquires or makes a comment about her: even when he seems to complain about his contrary offspring (the "willful little bitch" line), there is a hint of admiration, pride, and even amusement in Trevanion's voice. The old man understands that his daughter's willfulness portends sexual aggression, yet he is not bothered by this challenge to society's expectations. In the child's iconoclastic demeanor, the parent sees himself.

As Fell's faithful retainer for decades (perhaps for Verden's entire life), Kenrick initially seems like a mere servant loyally trying to protect his master. However, a lifelong servant such as Fell's aging butler definitely symbolizes the hegemony of the

venerable aristocracy—who else, after all, could expect to employ the same staff—perhaps even generations of the same family of retainers—except the British aristocracy? Thus Kenrick functions as a gatekeeper, vainly attempting to separate and maintain the expected lifestyle of the aristocracy while dealing with the radical disorder of Verden Fell’s obsessive romanticism and fascination with the “wrong” sort of woman—Ligeia. At the film’s climax, the old servant finally admits that he has tried to help Fell, but Ligeia’s post-hypnotic command was too strong to resist. “Only she can release him, and she’s dead,” Kenrick sadly concludes. Like Lord Trevanion, Kenrick is an old man who symbolizes a carefully defined and traditional interpretation of reality and propriety; also like Trevanion, Kenrick is charged with the paternalistic duty of protecting a willful, younger person who is captivated by the possibility of an unconventional existence. Yet by providing the protection he does, Kenrick subtly encourages Verden to pursue a lifestyle that culminates in sexual obsession and the mental decay Kenrick claims to dread.

The Tomb of Ligeia offers less in the way of pure shock and intense physical terror than the previous Poe/Price pictures, which is probably why the naysayers like Denis Meikle and Jonathan Rigby prefer earlier entries. However, there is much to be said for the film, particularly its success as “a pure Gothic tale in the traditional style” (Lampley 218). Undoubtedly the film, like its predecessors, deserves more respect than the dismissive conclusions of Tom Hutchinson and Roy Pickard, who conclude “in the final analysis most of the Corman films [are] little more than sappy little burlesques and spoofs” (105). Graced by a fine British supporting cast, gorgeous cinematography by

Arthur Grant (a veteran of the Hammer Horror school), striking use of real locations (including Stonehenge and a real crumbling abbey in Norfolk), and a provocative suggestion of sexuality as social rebellion, *The Tomb of Ligeia* deserves its place as the final—and finest—of Roger Corman's memorable collaborations with Poe and Price.

Chapter VIII

The Tragedy, “Man”: *The Conqueror Worm* (1968) and the Reeves Legacy

With the departure of Roger Corman, AIP temporarily abandoned its Poe series.

After the domestic release of *The Tomb of Ligeia* in early 1965, the studio proceeded with

The City Under the Sea, a (misquoted) title derived from Poe’s “The City in the Sea.”

While Vincent Price stars in and even reads a few lines from the poem, *The City Under the Sea* has essentially nothing to do with Edgar Allan Poe. In fact, the title was changed to *War-Gods of the Deep* for American consumption, an indication that even AIP wasn’t disingenuous enough to connect just any old thing with Poe—at least, not yet. Three years would pass before another putative Poe picture would be offered to the public. In this case, the situation of a faux Poe title involving *The City Under the Sea/War-Gods of the Deep* was reversed, and the 1968 project was called *Witchfinder General* in England but given a Poe title in the United States—*The Conqueror Worm*.

From this point on, any similarity between the so-called Poe films and their alleged source material would be increasingly coincidental. In fact, *Witchfinder General* was conceived and produced as a stand-alone project, with no conscious connection to the Poe series; AIP changed the title for the sole purpose of attracting fans of the Corman/Price/Poe collaborations. Nevertheless, associations with the spirit of Poe, if not the letter of his work, make *The Conqueror Worm* a suitable renaming of Michael Reeves’ final and best project, a powerful if unsettling meditation on the corrosive consequences of violence—even when allegedly committed in the name of justice—on both the individual and society—particularly females.

Critical reaction to AIP's desperate title change was understandably sharp. Dave Worrell and Lee Pfeiffer claim that AIP "shamelessly retitled [*Witchfinder General*] *The Conqueror Worm*, based on one of Poe's more obscure tales (sic)" (29). Philip Waddilove, the film's co-producer and a close personal friend of the director, deemed the title change "inappropriate" in his introduction to Benjamin Halligan's biography of Reeves (xiii). Even Vincent Price himself believed "*The Conqueror Worm* was the most ridiculous title for *Witchfinder General*" (qtd. in Senn 232). The overall impression conveyed by both observers of and participants in the production is that the title change is misleading, silly, and wholly contrary to the themes of both Reeves and Poe.

Yet the American title was not chosen entirely at random. According to AIP co-founder Samuel Z. Arkoff, "we came across an Edgar Allan Poe verse which included a line that spoke of a 'conqueror worm.' We weren't exactly sure what it meant . . . but it was pure Poe and seemed to fit . . ." (qtd. in Senn 231). Arkoff himself may not have understood "*The Conqueror Worm*," but Poe clearly intends the work to be an extended metaphor for death; the poet describes "a play of hopes and fears," associating life with a theatrical performance (960). Poe calls life a "drama" pursued by protagonists "Through a circle that ever returneth in/To the self-same spot," suggesting the inevitable cycle of existence. The poem concludes when "The curtain, a funeral pall,/Comes down with the rush of a storm" on "the tragedy 'Man,'/And its hero the Conqueror Worm" (961). In other words, human life is a futile pursuit of "hopes and fears" in which everybody dies while new generations rise to perpetuate the grim and meaningless cycle.

Although “The Conqueror Worm” has nothing to do with witchcraft, it conveys an utterly dark and pessimistic worldview that dovetails nicely with the tone of *Witchfinder General*. One of the most provocative and thoughtful depictions of violence and death ever committed to film, it is the primary evidence supporting the cult status of Michael Reeves (1943-1969), a brilliant but troubled young director whose potential as one of the world’s great filmmakers was cut short by his untimely death at the age of twenty-five. Reeves completed only three features before an (apparently) accidental overdose of barbiturates killed him, yet in spite of the meager number of titles on his resume—or perhaps because of it—he has gained a small but ardent following over the decades, with some observers going so far as to call Reeves the James Dean of horror cinema. Perhaps a better analogy is the career of country-rock musician Gram Parsons, whose unique fusion of sonic styles continues to influence other artists in spite of the fact that he recorded only two solo albums.

Loosely based on *Witchfinder General*, Ronald Bassett’s historical novel, *The Conqueror Worm* concerns Matthew Hopkins (Price), a seventeenth-century lawyer who profits by extracting confessions from supposed witches and extorts sexual favors from young women who fall into his power. Hopkins and his assistant, John Stearne (Robert Russell), torture Catholic priest John Lowes (Rupert Davies) until the clergyman’s niece, Sara (Hilary Dwyer), offers herself to Hopkins. After Stearne rapes Sara, Hopkins abandons her and orders Lowes’ execution. Sara’s fiancé, Richard Marshall (Ian Ogilvy), swears vengeance, but Hopkins captures the couple and tortures Sara in an attempt to compel Richard’s confession. Richard escapes and begins hacking Hopkins with an axe, but arriving soldiers shoot the witch finder. Thwarted in his desire to repay

Hopkins' evil in kind, Richard angrily cries "you took him from me!" over and over again; her mind finally destroyed, Sara screams despairingly as the frame freezes on her tormented image and the end credits roll.

The nihilistic vision and atmosphere of utter helplessness that permeate *The Conqueror Worm* are, as Arkoff maintains, quite relevant to Poe's poetic conceit. "It is safe to say that no director in cinema history exhibited such a consistently depressing and angry view of the world and humanity as Reeves," claims Danny Peary, further linking the film to the poem (56). The dark tone of the film is established from the pre-credit sequence, over which Price reads the first verse of Poe's poem (in the American version) peaceful shots of the English landscape are punctuated by hammering sounds, which are ultimately revealed to emanate from a hangman building a gallows. Soon a terrified old woman is dragged to the place of execution. The accused witch's screams are cut off with chilling finality when the stool is kicked out from under her feet; a zoom shot to the figure of Hopkins on horseback ends in a freeze frame, and as Paul Ferris' music swells murky and disturbing images play out behind the opening credits. As the film progresses, we recognize these illustrations as photographs altered to suggest period woodcuts of the film's principal victims and victimizers. At the film's conclusion, Price narrates the final verse of the poem while a final image of horror—Sara's screaming face—provides a terrible mute testimony to the truth contained in the poem's last lines. These ideas and images amply demonstrate that this story, like Poe's verse, demonstrates "... much of Madness, and more of Sin" (961).

Throughout the film, a litany of violent and gruesome images are displayed, images far more horrifying in their realism than the fantastic shocks of the previous Poe

entries. Reeves himself insisted that such intense realism was absolutely necessary to convey his intentions; as he explained to John Trevelyan, the British censor (and incidentally a distant relation), the film's "overall message . . . is as anti-violence as it can be. Violence breeds violence . . . violence itself is insanity" (qtd. in Murray 210). Certainly it is the unromantic and brutal attitude towards violence that has won the film so much admiration, but from the moment of first issue, the film has also suffered the umbrage of shocked critics. Playwright Alan Bennett condemned the film in no uncertain terms, first preparing a recipe list of the film's brutalities before launching into his rancorous review:

It is the most persistently sadistic and morally rotten film I have seen. It was (sic) a degrading experience, by which I mean it made me feel dirty. The world of film is not an autochthonous world: sadism which corrupts and repels in life continues to do so when placed on celluloid. It is not compounded by style nor excused by camera-work. (qtd. in Halligan 196-197)

Ken Russell, whose own controversial witch-hunting film *The Devils* (1971) seems greatly influenced by Reeves' earlier work, once told Benjamin Halligan that Reeves' final production was "one of the worst films I have seen and certainly the most nauseous" (162). In his survey of British horror, Andy Boot argues that the subtext of the film is "that man is an animal, never happier than when he is perpetrating acts of wanton

violence for nothing more than his own gratification” (183). Even Stephen King, himself often an admirer of graphic movie violence, judges *The Conqueror Worm* “surely one of the most revolting horror pictures to be released by a major studio in the Sixties” (194). Yet these comments fail to consider the purpose of the violence within the context of the story.

There is no question that the violence and brutality of *The Conqueror Worm* is grimly effective, even after four decades. As rough as the picture may have been in 1968, it is crucial to remember that AIP co-financed the film with Tigon British, a production company founded by infamous British “sexploitation” kingpin Tony Tenser. While Tenser himself was very supportive of what he knew was a provocative and intelligent thriller, his association with Reeves’ film undoubtedly colored many contemporary reviews. Thus *The Conqueror Worm* must be removed from its sleazy low-budget background to appreciate it without the terrible weight of British cultural norms of the period—significantly, the year of the worst social and cultural upheaval of the 1960s (Halligan 195).

Although set in 1645, *The Conqueror Worm* alludes to the anxiety associated with the revolutionary spirit so pervasive in 1968. Following the opening credits, Patrick Wymark, who also plays Oliver Cromwell in a cameo appearance, provides a brief prologue to set up the action. “The structure of law and order has collapsed,” Wymark explains, and “local magistrates indulge in individual whims. Justice and injustice are dispensed in more or less equal quantities, and without opposition.” Thus the stage is set for Reeves’ treatise on the nature of law and justice and the shortcomings of those

charged with maintaining the standards of both, whether in the seventeenth or twentieth centuries. Much of the film's ability to horrify stems from the fact that Matthew Hopkins is not only an actual historic personage, but a sadistic killer operating with "the full blessing of what law there is." In its depiction of cultural upheaval sparked by Puritan repression sanctioned by government, *The Conqueror Worm* functions as an allegory, much as Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (1952) uses a literal witch hunt as a metaphor for the ideological witch hunts of the McCarthy era.

Several scenes include conversations between Hopkins and various local authorities, and Hopkins, a former lawyer, frequently alludes to the legal aspects of his witch hunting. He continually reminds Stearne to follow the "prescribed methods" for extracting confessions, often following his instructions with some reference to the necessity for due process. When Hopkins and Stearne first meet the villagers who have summoned them, Hopkins initially expresses the possibility that the accusations against Lowes are unfounded. "By the way, do you know what they call me now? Witchfinder General," Price remarks to his assistant with no little pride. "There are those who think I should be appointed such for all of England—appointed by Parliament," he continues. These and other lines, delivered straight-faced by Price, indicate that Hopkins believes his holy crusade is necessary and acceptable because it is legally sanctioned.

Yet at no point does Reeves forget the corruption that mars Hopkins' soul and ultimately reveals his sanctimonious pronouncements as hypocritical ramblings. As soon as he meets Sara, Hopkins is willing to exchange his so-called legal responsibilities—in this case, torturing her uncle—for the carnal delights she promises. The lawyer

deliberately interjects legal terminology into his negotiations with Sara: “And you will make every attempt to present the facts to me?” he asks, later telling her “I’ve come to question you” when he arrives for their first rendezvous. After deciding that John Lowes must die, Hopkins claims the battered priest’s incoherent mumblings are a confession and instructs Stearne to make sure the witnesses concur, demonstrating the witch finder’s willingness to resort to false confessions when it suits his purposes. Prior to their final confrontation with Richard and Sara, Hopkins points out to Stearne that they can get rid of their enemies by condemning them as witches. “We have the power to do it legally,” Hopkins remarks.

Throughout the film, Hopkins bolsters his connection to secular law by referring to the religious motivations that inspire witch hunting. “Go on, Stearne, you’re doing God’s work,” Hopkins says during the pricking of Sara at the film’s climax. Elsewhere, Hopkins accepts payment and tells the magistrate the money is “to be spent in the service of our Lord.” Hopkins frequently exhorts Stearne to discover if “the mark of Satan” is upon their victims. From these comments and actions it is clear that Matthew Hopkins is truly “a disturbed Puritan—part true believer, part opportunist” (French and French 230). The apparent sincerity he possessed when he first began hunting witches has been diluted by greed, sadism, and a growing sense of entitlement and superiority.

Certainly avarice and pride motive the witch hunter, propelling him to grander and more elaborate schemes to win confessions from his victims. Yet an important component in Hopkins’ psychological makeup is his thinly concealed disgust and hatred for the people around him. He constantly insults Sterne, never missing a chance to

remind him that he “you ride with me because you help me in my work.” Price adds a touch of overzealousness to the expressions of piety Hopkins makes to the local authorities upon the completion of a job, clearly transmitting Hopkins’ insincerity without allowing his delivery to descend into camp. Furthermore,

Price conveys the scorn that someone of Hopkins’ breeding and intelligence would have for a world which allows him . . . to commit what he knows to be monstrous, sadistic acts. Hopkins is a god in an England full of greedy, hypocritical, superstitious people who he feels are inferior to him. He . . . debases them by raping their women, taking their money, and executing the few among them brave enough to protest (Peary 57)

Especially telling is a quick shot of Hopkins at the conclusion of his initial conversation with Sara. As he turns away, Hopkins shoots Sara a stern look of disapproval; even though he is essentially blackmailing her into having sex with him, he is still disgusted by what he perceives as her immorality. It is a subtle gesture subtly made, but this facial expression justifies Mark Clark’s comment that the role of Hopkins represents “Price at the pinnacle of his career” (97).

Another example of Hopkins’ distaste for the people around him—and by extension, all of humanity—is the fact he is never portrayed actually torturing anybody. John Stearne does all the actual interrogation, slapping suspects and pricking them with a long spike in search of the Devil’s mark. When the physical exertion is too much for one man, locals are recruited to assist Stearne while Hopkins grimly observes. The witch

hunter barks orders to Stearne and other underlings, but he keeps his hands to himself. Tellingly, the dark clothes Hopkins favors contrast with the white gloves he wears throughout the movie. The white gloves symbolize a bizarre kind of purity in Hopkins' nature; furthermore, they imply the "kid gloves" worn by wealthy playboys of later generations, symbols of the escape from physical labor—the dirty work, in other words.

When Hopkins and Stearne are reunited after being chased by Roundhead troops, Stearne blames Hopkins for his arrest and injury at the hands of soldiers. Hopkins dismisses the complaints, pointing out "I even saved your share of the pay [for the latest executions] even though I did all the work." Of course, Hopkins never actually touched any of the victims—once again the bloodletting has been assigned to other hands. In fact, the only act of torture that Hopkins attempts is the branding of Sara at the film's climax—and even that action is interrupted before it begins when Richard breaks free. Hopkins is more than willing to shoot anybody who threatens him—and he does so more than once—but these expressions of physical violence are necessary for self-defense, not the pursuit of Satan's consorts. Price's restraint and subtlety make these aspects of the character significant and allow Hopkins to appear "as a superb presence of inexorable vindictiveness around which the other characters move with fascinated repulsion" (Pirie 154). Rick Worland accurately assesses Price's turn as Hopkins "one of [his] best performances" (30).

In the earlier Poe-inspired films, there are relatively clear distinctions between the villain and the hero. *The Conqueror Worm* is so memorable because it blurs the line between villainy and heroism, calling into question the boundaries that separate the more

general, less emotionally charged terms of protagonist and antagonist. In the case of Richard Marshall, the nominal hero, there is a gradual transformation from stalwart to psychopath. When we first meet Richard, he is smirking to himself while riding in a Roundhead cavalry patrol and is teased by his friend Swallow (Nicky Henson) about “ungodly” thoughts of Sara. This exchange suggests the innocence and inexperience of Richard, who is a simple farmer and neophyte soldier. Soon, however, Richard kills his first man: he saves his captain’s life by firing on a lurking sniper behind the officer. “He was trying to kill you, Sir,” Richard remarks almost to himself, dumbfounded at the event.

Richard’s innocence is compounded by a strong sense of idealism. He sees the world in simple, stark terms—black and white, good and evil. His love for Sara is sincere, and it is perfectly reasonable for Richard to be angry when he discovers the terrible violations visited upon his fiancée and her kindly uncle. However, Richard’s idealism—a positive trait in almost any other film—is the source for his own descent into violence and madness. Because he cannot abide the murder of John Lowes and the abuse of Sara, he becomes obsessed with vengeance. Richard temporarily deserts his command to investigate the trouble at home, and he makes it clear to Swallow that he intends to desert again if necessary—even if his actions lead to a court martial--to hunt down Hopkins and Stearne. “It’s madness!” Swallow declares. “It’s justice—my justice,” Richard grimly replies. Richard’s ideals of home and hearth have been compromised, and it is the transgression against his conception of the world around him that propels his quest for vengeance, causing him to abandon his honor and everything else he claims to

value. He claims to seek justice for Sara, but it is vengeance for his shattered worldview that Richard truly pursues.

In one of the film's most resonant scenes, Richard and Sara kneel at the desecrated altar in her murdered uncle's church. Richard declares that Sara and he are married, although significantly there is neither a priest (symbol of religious authority) nor witnesses (aspects of legal authority) to sanction the nuptials. Furthermore, Richard swears an oath before God that he will punish the criminals who have caused the disorder to his life. The contrast between a vow of life (marriage) and a vow of death (revenge) foreshadows Richard's growing obsession.

At the film's climax, Richard refuses to confess before Hopkins and Stearne, even though to do so would spare Sara further torture. Richard cries out in frustration and promises to kill Hopkins, but the shards of his compromised idealism—perhaps a mirror of Hopkins' own decayed principles—prevent him from uttering the words that would relieve his wife. When Richard attacks Hopkins, he intends to prolong the witch finder's suffering. Swallow bursts in and fires the bullet that slays Hopkins—sparing him additional torture. Richard's repeated cry of “you took him from me!” conveys the anguish he feels not only at being cheated out of Hopkins' final destruction, but also hints that he realizes how his murderous quest has reduced him to Hopkins' level.

Richard's devotion to his personal *weltanschauung* provides an interesting insight into masculine conceptions of order and justice. Although Richard's behavior and devotion to duty prior to Hopkins' depredations imply acknowledgement of and consent to support pre-existing social conventions, Richard quickly abandons this adherence to

the established system in order to force the world around him to conform to his personal notions of right and wrong. In this sense, Richard embraces violence and aggression to achieve his goals, which with its emphasis on action and disregard of consequences implies an inherently masculine approach to problem solving. When the rules of society no longer undergird his personal convictions and assumptions, Richard does not hesitate to compel a unique and individual sense of order in a “manly” fashion. As a result, Richard becomes a mirror image of Hopkins, placing his own self-centered agenda above the prescriptions of the laws and customs both men have pledged to support. In short, Marshall and Hopkins battle one another partially to express their domination and control of the situation—with little regard for the consequences to others.

Perhaps the greatest tragedies visited upon any character in *The Conqueror Worm* are those suffered by Sara. Initially she is portrayed as an innocent country girl, yet it is highly significant that she is not a virgin by the time she crosses Hopkins’ path. Sara willingly offers herself to Richard—with the tacit approval of her uncle, who wishes Richard to carry her far away from the brewing trouble—but not before briefly chiding him for an overly amorous advance: “the army has taught you rough manners,” she complains. Soon, however, she is consummating her love affair with Richard; as an unmarried woman engaging in sexual congress, she has transgressed against the values of her society.

Sara is quite aware of her sexual powers. When she rushes to her uncle’s aid, Hopkins confronts her. The terrified girl initially admits she is the priest’s niece, but when Hopkins observes, “you, too, may be corrupted by Satan,” she changes her story,

now claiming to be a foundling. “And you have remained innocent all these years,” Hopkins asks deliberately, fully cognizant of the double meaning of the word “innocent” in this context. To this Sara replies, “if you would release [my uncle] now, you might be convinced tonight that all this is needless.” In other words, it is Sara, not Hopkins, who makes the first suggestion that there is a carnal solution to the matter at hand.

Throughout the scene Sara is flirtatious, cutting her eyes and smiling knowingly at Hopkins. The witch hunter takes the bait, and it is a highly distressed Sara who quickly turns away from him.

Hopkins thinks he has bargained for Sara’s maidenhead, not just her body itself. He understands after they sleep together that she was not a virgin before he came to her in the night. Therefore, the idea is already planted in his Puritanical mind that she is “unclean”—a whore. When he discovers she has had sex with Stearne, he is too disgusted to touch her again. Reeves shows a villager telling Hopkins that he has witnessed Stearne and Sara together; there is no dialogue in the shot, meaning it is unknown whether or not the villager, who is depicting observing the attack with a salacious look on his face, made it clear that Hopkins’ assistant raped the girl. Would Sara’s lack of consent have made a difference in Hopkins’ attitude? Probably not, as Hopkins has already decided she is unworthy of fundamental human dignity and respect.

Sara realizes the terrible mistake she has made in sleeping with Hopkins. Her honor is destroyed, as is her fidelity to Richard; her sacrifice delays her uncle’s death but cannot prevent it. Stearne has been spying on Hopkins, which is how he knows his employer has been sleeping with the girl. In his brutal logic, Stearne has as much right to

the girl's body as does his employer—whether the girl likes it or not. Thus Sara also gets raped for her efforts to save her uncle, further compounding her misery and shame.

Beyond the sexual abuse she suffers and the death of her only known relative, Sara is subjected to pricking and other tortures near the film's conclusion. She must suffer the physical agonies that her husband will not spare her in the form of confession. Then she must witness Richard's brutal attack on Hopkins, which inspires conflicting feelings of appreciation and loathing in her heart. When Swallow shoots Hopkins and Richard becomes enraged, Sara is confronted with the final destruction of her sense of perspective and propriety. She is an unchaste woman, practically a harlot in the repressive standards of her time; her husband has abandoned his love for her in his quest for vengeance, and he has at last lost his mind. When one of the troopers mutters "may God have mercy on us all," it is the last straw: Sarah herself cracks under the strain of her ordeal, her screams of madness a cruel epiphany recognizing the lack of godliness—of any sense of order, supernatural or man-made—in the rural England that is her entire world—and, perhaps, the world beyond.

Just as Richard and Hopkins have rejected established society's rules in order to further their own ends, Sara has attempted to manipulate matters for her own benefit. She has violated the social contract to develop her own *weltanschauung*, even though her intentions are ostensibly benevolent. Yet in seventeenth-century rural England, no woman can expect to challenge the patriarchal hegemony, no matter how honorable the purpose. An independent feminine world view threatens just and unjust males alike, and any attempt to foster such a transgressive order must be violently suppressed. Indeed, the

witchfinder/witch opposition is a highly potent expression of the concurrent gender conflict within the larger society. Although Hopkins metes out punishment to those women who stand accused of witchcraft, Richard's loss of focus regarding his wife's violation and the established society's lack of concern for her plight indicate a tacit support of misogynistic brutality to suppress female power.

The abuses heaped upon Sara are unquestionably horrible, but with the exception of John Lowes, all of victims depicted are women. There is, then, a remarkable streak of misogyny running rampant in *The Conqueror Worm*, a further acknowledgment of the intense gender struggle symbolized by the witchfinder/witch conflict. Every woman in the film is portrayed as property, as something to be "taken" or "kept" but never fully or consistently appreciated. When one elderly suspect claims she can't be executed because she's going to have a baby, Stearne cracks, "who'd want to make you pregnant?" His joke draws appreciative laughter from the gathering crowd—yet another mob of villagers who, as they do throughout the film, are drawn to the spectacle of witch killing out of a mixture of fear, excitement, and boredom and never express dread or disgust at the executions. This lack of disturbance among the townspeople indicates a general agreement that witches must be destroyed—as must any other woman who challenges the status quo.

Further evidence of seventeenth-century English misogyny occurs later in the film, during the execution of accused witch Elizabeth Clark (Maggie Kimberly). Hopkins decides to experiment with burning witches, and Elizabeth is the first victim of this brutal method of execution. The unfortunate woman is tied to a ladder-like device

and lowered into the flames with excruciatingly deliberateness, her body immolated while her head flares up like a bonfire. Elizabeth's screams pierce the soundtrack until they finally trail off. Once again Reeves intercuts shots of villagers watching the execution with stoic expressions of acceptance (except for Elizabeth's husband, played by composer Paul Ferris, who will later be mortally wounded in a failed attempt to vengefully assassinate Hopkins), even approval; most disturbing of the villagers' faces is that of a little blonde boy, grinning with excitement. Later he and other children are depicted roasting potatoes in the smoldering remnants of the fire, a shot that conveys the ignorance of "innocent" children eating food cooked in human remains and foreshadows their unquestioning acceptance of their culture's anti-female attitude. Women, it seems, are only valuable when they are performing utilitarian functions—including, in this grim sequence, literally providing themselves as fuel for the fire that cooks children's dinners.

In a move insisted upon by AIP executives, Reeves was forced to shoot additional footage of topless actresses playing the tavern whores. This decision, clearly made to increase the exploitability of the film, betrays a 1960s-era sexism only marginally less virulent than that found in 1645. For all his lascivious behavior, Hopkins seems to genuinely despise women. "Strange, isn't it, how much iniquity the Lord vested in the female," he muses at one point. When he introduces the idea of burning witches by announcing, "I intend to initiate a new method of execution . . . it's a fitting end for the foul ungodliness in womankind." Sara, of course, is ultimately a pawn traded back and forth between Hopkins and Richard in their own bizarre contest of ego and will. In the

end, Sara, the “witches,” and the wenches are reduced to the same level: they are all commodities to be traded, not people to be respected.

One factor that cannot be ignored is the power of cinematography in *The Conqueror Worm*. Reeves found an extremely capable cinematographer in John Coquillon, whose vistas of the English countryside imply an epic dimension to the film that its budget would never have allowed otherwise. The “overpowering use of landscape” is one of the film’s most stimulating elements, according to David Pirie (155). Seemingly endless tracking shots of Richard Marshall riding across the countryside and two sequences in which Hopkins and Stearne are pursued by either Richard or other Roundhead troops imbue the picture with a sensibility associated with the Western genre. This was in fact a deliberate effect Reeves pursued in his desire for what amounts to an English Western (Murray 131). In his juxtaposition of “natural beauty with human depravity,” Reeves “contrives to make the natural scenery and its rootedness a strong positive force against the shifting nomadic evil of the characters; in this respect the film is almost mystical and pantheistic” (Pirie 153). Given that the earth is frequently gendered feminine, the scenes of Richard, Hopkins, and other men fighting, killing, and otherwise performing masculine aggression against a background of natural beauty suggest that it is the phallocentric patriarchy that is “unnatural” and destined, eventually, to be consumed by the feminine.

In the wake of its strong critical and popular reception, *The Witchfinder General/The Conqueror Worm* inspired a number of direct and indirect copies. Because the film was particularly popular in West Germany, it inspired a “grotesquely sadistic sex

movie” called *Mark of the Devil* in the United States (Hardy 206). As Michael Weldon puts it in *The Psychotronic Encyclopedia of Film*, “this is the one with the famous ‘stomach distress’ bags given to viewers. . . . in a brilliant American ad campaign stressing the gore . . . “ (Weldon 460). Far bloodier and less intelligent than Michael Reeves’ film and suffused with an even greater streak of misogyny, *Mark of the Devil* featured Herbert Lom, a contemporary of Vincent Price, as the witch hunter, Udo Kier blatantly aping Ian Ogilvy in his performance as the hero, and Reggie Nalder as an assistant witch hunter even more repulsive than Robert Russell’s John Stearne. The German production even borrowed an English director, Michael Armstrong, who was an associate of Michael Reeves and had—like Reeves—made films for Tigon. In turn, Armstrong’s take on witch hunting spawned a sequel, *Mark of the Devil II* (1972).

While *Mark of the Devil* and its follow-up exploited the basest elements of *The Conqueror Worm* and eschewed most of its artistry, Reeves’ film did influence a number of respectable efforts, including the aforementioned Ken Russell production of *The Devils*. The Hammer film *Twins of Evil* (1972) starred Peter Cushing as a very Matthew Hopkinsesque Puritan, only this time focused on burning suspected vampires. Because these films depict the torture and murder of women who at least nominally threaten the patriarchal social construct, they also ultimately confirm their anxiety regarding a firmly identifiable feminine world view. Robin Hardy’s *The Wicker Man* (1973) touches on notions of religious fanaticism that can be traced back to *The Conqueror Worm*. Perhaps the most interesting films presaged by *The Conqueror Worm* are two of Sam Peckinpah’s most notable—and violent—productions: *The Wild Bunch* (1969), which directly

borrowed “the litho credits” of Reeves’ film, and *Straw Dogs* (1971), which features the brutal rape of the protagonist’s wife in rural England, as does Reeves’ film (Halligan 191) and thus expresses a similar anxiety about a gynocentric social order. Interestingly, Peckinpah hired John Coquillon to photograph *Straw Dogs* on the basis of his work on *The Conqueror Worm*; the two would collaborate on additional films thereafter.

The success of his third feature did not guarantee Michael Reeves further glories; he spent the last few months of his life vainly trying to set up new productions, none of which ever gelled. More ominously, Reeves battled severe emotional problems, including depression and insomnia, a battle that ended with his fatal drug overdose on February 11, 1969. Yet Reeves’ death did not prevent AIP from trying to build on his legacy; several projects he had discussed wound up being produced, often featuring Vincent Price and other veterans on *The Conqueror Worm* on both sides of the camera. Two of these productions are relevant here: *The Oblong Box* (1969) and *Cry of the Banshee* (1969).

Although the title comes from a Poe tale, *The Oblong Box* takes nothing from the original story, which concerns a mysterious, coffin-like container being transported on a ship by a most peculiar passenger. In fact, a more logical name for this film would be *The Premature Burial*—the notion of being buried alive is in fact borrowed from that Poe classic—but Roger Corman had already adapted the story once before, so AIP did not wish to recycle the title. There is a scene in the film wherein anguished madman Sir Edward Markham (Alastair Williamson) recounts the terror of being buried alive: “Waking up in that horrible oblong box; no air to breathe; trapped, and no escape. The

earth raining down on the lid, every shovelful burying you more deeply.” These lines recall the horrific highlight of Poe’s “The Premature Burial”:

It may be asserted, without hesitation, that *no* event is so terribly well adapted to inspire the supremeness of bodily and of mental distress, as is burial before death. The unendurable oppression of the lungs—the stifling fumes of the damp earth—the blackness of the absolute Night—the silence like a sea that overwhelms—the unseen but palpable presence of the Conqueror Worm—these things, . . . carry into the heart . . . a degree of appalling and intolerable horror from which the most daring imagination must recoil. (262-263)

Beyond this distant allusion to the source tale and the shared themes of guilt and live burial, there is nothing to connect the film to any Poe story at all.

A confused hodgepodge of various genre clichés, *The Oblong Box* “is a somewhat contrived combination of Burke and Hare with echoes of Jack the Ripper and *The Phantom of the Opera*. The most interesting aspect is that . . . like a guilty conscience, the evils of British colonialism come home to haunt and destroy its perpetrators” (Hardy 210). Vincent Price stars as Julian Markham, a wealthy Briton who owns a plantation in Africa. His brother, Sir Edward (Alister Williamson), has been tortured and cursed by a native tribe for killing one of their children; suffering from occasional lapses of sanity as well as a hideously scarred face, Sir Edward is locked in the attic. With the assistance of his confederate, Trench (Peter Arne), Sir Edward arranges for an African witch doctor (Harry Baird) to slip him a potion that feigns death. Sir Edward is accidentally buried

alive; body snatchers subsequently bring his coffin to the surgery of Dr. Neuhartt (Christopher Lee, “outfitted in an appalling silver Beatle wig,” according to Lucy Chase Williams, 217), who becomes the madman’s unwilling accomplice in a campaign of murderous revenge.

Michael Reeves had been slated to direct *The Oblong Box* as a follow-up to *The Conqueror Worm*, but his rapidly eroding health, coupled with the many weaknesses inherent in Lawrence Huntingdon’s jumbled original script—which Benjamin Halligan terms “profoundly un-Reevesian” (211)—ultimately led to the director’s replacement by Gordon Hessler (1930-), whom AIP ultimately groomed as their principal horror specialist. Former film critic Christopher Wicking was brought in to streamline the script. According to the screenwriter, he “made the theme of imperial exploitation of the natives the subtext, the cause of the curse” (qtd. in Meikle 155). It is through this then-innovative theme that the movie accomplishes what little sense of originality it possesses; moreover, the guilt of the Markham brothers faintly recalls the overwhelming guilt of actual Poe protagonists, both in the author’s fiction and in the earlier AIP adaptations.

Sir Edward’s punishment at the hands of the natives fills his brother with dread and shame. Several times during the course of the film, Julian remarks upon his regrets. During one of his many long walks with new bride Elizabeth (Hilary Dwyer), Julian announces his intention to “abandon” his plantation, even though to do so will essentially impoverish him. Elsewhere, Julian observes that “we” (his family in particular and Europe in general) have “plundered the land” in Africa and must deal with “sin and retribution”—a peculiarly Poesque line that underscores Wicking’s take on the

proceedings. Ultimately it is revealed that Julian, not Edward, was the Markham who killed the native child; therefore, it is Julian who should have paid for the crime.

Certainly Julian's guilty conscience troubles him in regard to his role in his brother's tragedy, yet he never seems willing to pay an appropriate retribution. Eventually Edward and Julian confront each other on the family estate; Julian shoots his sibling, who bites him before expiring. The film ends with Elizabeth going to Edward's former attic abode, only to be informed by her deteriorating husband that it is his turn to be locked up. "This is *my* room," he announces sadly. Thus do the Markham brothers both pay for their avarice and humanity; in doing so, they represent the liability shared collectively by Western civilization for the exploitation of the Third World.

Beyond the notions of guilt and premature burial, *The Oblong Box* offers no significant connection to Poe. It offers the least intriguing depiction of female characters in the entire series as well: the only women of consequence in the film are Elizabeth, who is depicted as a rather one-dimensional stereotype of the frightened heroine, a few servants, and a prostitute (Uta Levka) whom Edward murders. The most important servant, Neuhartt's maid, Sally (Sally Geeson), is depicted as a sexually aggressive character; she even beds Sir Edward, whose face is covered by a crimson hood, out of a combination of pity, curiosity, and greed (she thinks the aristocrat will take her as a mistress). In its casual assumption that women exist in horror films simply to function as clichés, *The Oblong Box* marginalizes women, exploiting them without any of the thematic weight Michael Reeves brought to *The Conqueror Worm*; in the end, Reeves'

film may depict more women suffering more abuse, but there is no hint of approval, much less blasé acceptance, of the female condition as is found in Hessler's project.

Whether or not Reeves could have improved the troubled production is a question that cannot be answered at this late date. In fact, given Reeves' very public distaste for Vincent Price and his failing health, it is likely Reeves' participation would have made the film worse or made no difference at all. Yet the presence of actors Price, Dwyer, and Rupert Davies (as an artist neighbor of the Markhams), coupled with the vibrant photography of John Coquillon, all veterans of *The Conqueror Worm*, make it impossible not to wonder "what if."

Furthermore, the missed opportunities that abound in *The Oblong Box* are singularly confounding. Why make a film featuring Vincent Price and Christopher Lee, together for the first time on screen, and then give them only one scene together? Why not cast Lee as Sir Edward? Perhaps Hessler's most effective cinematic trick is to incorporate Edward's point of view in many shots; coupled with the fact that Edward's horrible face is kept hidden until the climax, this device builds a modicum of suspense. However, when his face is finally revealed, the makeup job is more laughable than frightening; Denis Meikle describes Edward's appearance as "a big hooter" upon which sprout "evil-looking acne heads" (157). Without exception, the performances are lethargic and/or uninspired; even his own daughter thinks that Vincent Price "reverted to camp" in the film, particularly in comparison to *The Conqueror Worm* (Price 270).

As ineffective as *The Oblong Box* may be, it is considerably better than *Cry of the Banshee*. Although blatantly promoted as a Poe adaptation, there is absolutely nothing in

the Poe canon appropriated for the film—not even the title. A verse from “The Bells” affixed to an opening title is the one reference at all to the American author—and even it consists of “incongruous lines—nonsensical in context” (Rigby 164). What results is a confusing hodgepodge of elements swiped from earlier AIP efforts and an atmosphere of desperation—permeated by suggestions of almost contemptuous indifference for the long-running series, and by extension, its star—that make *Cry of the Banshee* a poor coda indeed for Price’s Gothic screen persona. For in the wake of this film, the actor would never again appear in a period (pre-twentieth century) horror movie.

Once again director Gordon Hessler and scripter Christopher Wicking (in collaboration with Tim Kelly) teamed up to make a Price film for AIP. These veterans of *The Oblong Box* followed that film with *Scream and Scream Again* (1969), a genuinely fascinating—if unquestionably uneven—hybrid of the horror, science fiction, and spy genres suffused with elements of the police procedural. That film had the distinction of featuring Price in a contemporary horror film for the first time since he began his association with AIP nearly a decade earlier; it also boasted appearances by horror veterans Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing, although Cushing’s single scene did not involve either of his illustrious co-stars. Undoubtedly Hessler and Wicking occasionally demonstrated wit and style in their previous efforts, but the only imaginative element in *Cry of the Banshee* is the opening credit sequence designed by Monty Python regular/director Terry Gilliam.

Set in the sixteenth century, the film concerns the Whitman clan, headed by magistrate Lord Edward Whitman (Price), who determines to wipe out the “witches” who

practice “the Old Religion” in his rural English community. Whitman stops short of killing Oona (Elisabeth Bergner), the leader of the witches, which turns out to be a mistake of uncharacteristic mercy: Oona calls upon Satan to “send [her] an avenger” to retaliate against Whitman and his family. The avenger turns out to be a *sidhe*, an evil spirit that possesses the Whitman groom, Roderick (Patrick Mower), turning him into what appears to be a bargain basement werewolf (*sidhes*, incidentally, are Celtic faeries, not lycanthropes) who then stalks and slays the Whitmans one by one.

Hessler and Wicking unabashedly steal from earlier—and better—entries in the Poe series. Lord Edward presides over several elaborate balls, which are attended by his wealthy friends; during these events, he makes sport of impoverished villagers, teasing and abusing them (and killing them when it suites his mood). These scenes echo Price’s activities as Prospero in *The Masque of the Red Death*, and the fact that his guests’ merriment is frequently interrupted by the howl of the *sidhe* recalls Poe’s short story, in which the tolling of Prospero’s black clock causes “a brief disconcert of the whole gay company” attending the party (270). The fact that the possessed groomsman is named “Roderick” is an obvious allusion to *House of Usher*. Most significantly, the hunt for witches and the scenes of brutality associated with the treatment of suspects are obviously derived from *The Conqueror Worm*, although in this case the witches are genuine.

Unlike the Reeves film, however, the brutal scenes of torture and abuse in *Cry of the Banshee* do not underscore any significant intellectual or artistic point of view. The only purpose of these scenes, apparently, is to exploit the more controversial and

provocative aspects of *The Conqueror Worm*. Without Reeves' grim artistry to justify the inclusion of such brutality, Hessler's movie becomes more sordid and repulsive than even AIP itself desired. The scenes in question emphasize the sexual abuse of women; many dresses are ripped, allowing flashes of bare breasts designed to whet the basest appetites of viewers. "According to the law," Lord Edward tells a suspect, "as a witch you are to be whipped through the streets until your back is bloody and then to look on the world through the stocks," a sentence carried out under the unblinking eye of Hessler's camera. The disturbing result of such artless sexual violence is that it seemingly "authorizes impulses toward violence in males and encourages impulses toward victimization in females," according to certain critical assumptions in regard to screen violence noted by Carol J. Clover (43).

Cry of the Banshee offers little in terms of original or innovative ideas. The only potentially innovative notion in the film pertains to the depiction of the Whitman clan as an example of social and sexual dysfunction. Lord Edward is even more intent on exploiting his power over the less fortunate than his cinematic model, Matthew Hopkins; Edward notes that "authority is the main point of government, and maintaining authority is the main purpose of law," but his authority over his own household seems to encourage debauchery among his children. Edward himself ridicules and torments a captured "heathen" girl, even going so far as to roughly kiss her before his amused party guests. The magistrate even looks back at his emotionally fragile wife, Patricia (Essy Persson), in lascivious triumph, then turns back to assault his victim further. Ultimately Lord Edward's concept of justice confirms the patriarchal hegemony and is used to viciously

repress any indication of a feminine revision to the established order, whether it stems from the pagan celebrations of witches or the somewhat more conventional social norms Patricia meekly represents.

Interestingly, *Cry of the Banshee* is one of the few horror films in which Price's character fathers children—and the only one in which a Price character has more than one child or a male offspring. Given the boorishness of their father, it is unsurprising that the Whitman children imitate his behavior, particularly favored son Sean (Stephan Chase), who spends most of his screen time forcing himself on serving wenches and even attempts to rape Patricia (his stepmother, as it turns out). Whitman's other son, Harry (Carl Rigg), returns from a college sojourn and initially seems somewhat distanced from his family's unpleasant behavior, yet he demonstrates affection for his sister, Maureen (Hilary Dwyer), that borders on the incestuous—affection Maureen reciprocates in kind.

The single most thoughtful scene in the entire film features an argument between Edward, Harry, and Maureen that disintegrates into a shoving match between father and son. Suddenly the scuffle ends, and the three family members soon break out into laughter, amused at the realization that they are all truly alike. In its acknowledgment of the humor and the horror inherent in the Whitman family dynamic, the scene illustrates David J. Skal's observation that the decay of the family unit is one of the most pervasive thematic developments to emerge in the Vietnam era fantasy film. As Skal puts it, "the family is a sick joke, its house more likely to offer siege instead of shelter" (*Horror* 354) in the horror films of the 1970s and becomes the agent of destruction, not salvation, for traditional values and the "normal" social order.

Maureen is the nominal heroine of the project, ostensibly just another young woman menaced by a monster. However, Dwyer's performance hints at how closely Maureen takes after her father. Maureen is a stubborn, haughty young woman, her superiority over the villagers a perhaps unconscious assumption descended from her father. Like Edward and her brothers, Maureen displays a profoundly active sexuality; she is depicted as being the aggressor in her affair with Roderick. In their first scene together they recline in the woods, and in other scenes they are in bed together; in all of these scenes, Maureen cuddles with her lover in positions of repose indicative of postcoital bliss. While Maureen makes an effort to be more discreet about her sexual activities than her male relatives—a nod towards the sexist double standard of the period—she is nevertheless comparatively bold. While she seems genuinely fond of her “groom”—a most intriguing title for the possessed servant—she ultimately sides with her father: at the film's climax, Maureen saves Edward from Roderick's attack by shooting her lover in the face.

The entire Whitman family ultimately pays the price for emulating its father's misdeeds. They are all killed by the *sidhe* (although we don't see Edward himself die). For only the third time in the series, Price's character is still alive at the end; having insisted on seeing Roderick a final time, the patriarch visits the cemetery and insists on opening his erstwhile servant's coffin, which is empty. Whitman flees to his carriage, only to find Harry and Maureen murdered in his absence by the still lively Roderick, who takes the reins and drives Whitman into the forest towards an unknown fate. The evil he has practiced and encouraged among his offspring has apparently consigned Edward Whitman to a fate worse than death.

In this, her third and final appearance alongside Vincent Price, Hilary Dwyer achieves a record of sorts: she becomes Price's most frequent leading lady (in horror movies, at any rate). Furthermore, the actress plays significantly different roles in each production, moving on from Price's victim in *The Conqueror Worm* to his wife in *The Oblong Box* before winding up as his daughter in *Cry of the Banshee*. This variety of relationships within Dwyer's roles was not lost on the horror star; the actress recalled that Price joked, "if I get to play his mother, we'd get married" (qtd. in Halligan 210). Dwyer's presence logically reflects her membership in the Reevesian "stock company" and potent chemistry with Price, but it also establishes her onscreen persona as a reflection—and refutation—of the Price persona. Innocent where Price is corrupt in *The Conqueror Worm*, young where he is older in *The Oblong Box*, and daughter to his father in *Cry of the Banshee*, Dwyer comes to represent the conflicts inherent in constructs of male-female relationships whether adversarial, romantic, or filial in nature.

There is no question that Michael Reeves helmed one of the most effective and aesthetically rich of Vincent Price's horror movies. Whether or not *The Witchfinder General* is rightfully classed among the Poe adaptations may be debatable, but whether or not the film was appropriately retitled for American consumption is not. How high Reeves' reputation might have soared had he completed more films is impossible to determine, but it seems likely the tragic director would have amounted to more than a footnote in British film history. Yet Reeves' reputation is not disputed; his one fully realized feature continues to elicit commentary—positive and negative—years after its creation, and his influence on screen violence is clear. It is perhaps unfortunate that the horror films made by AIP shortly after the filmmaker's demise so crudely exploit the

very elements that Reeves handled with such sensitivity, but diluted or not they remain the clearest examples of Michael Reeves' cinematic legacy.

Chapter IX

“A Hideous Throng”: Miscellaneous Titles

It is possible to divide the AIP series of Poe adaptations into two distinct periods: the initial period, 1960-1965, during which Roger Corman directed Vincent Price in six feature films at least partially derived from Poe’s fiction, and the later period, 1968-1970, during which Michael Reeves and Gordon Hessler (selected to take over after Reeves’ sudden death) directed Price in three films not literally connected to Poe but considerably influenced by the author’s themes and iconography. Thus there are nine films in what can be termed the “canon” of the series because of their shared traits. Yet outside this canon are seven productions that must be acknowledged in any discussion of the series. They do not fit comfortably because either Price or one of his key directors does not participate in their creation; in the case of *The Haunted Palace* and *Twice-Told Tales* (both 1963), the source material is not Poe (*Twice-Told Tales* isn’t even an AIP production, although it is clearly inspired by the AIP franchise and is now owned by the same company, MGM/United Artists, that controls the AIP catalogue; therefore, all the films in question are now “siblings” of the same corporate entity).

The first of these miscellaneous titles to be considered is the one that comes closest to being canonical: *The Haunted Palace*. Although marketed as yet another Poe adaptation and featuring quotations from the author’s poem of that title, the film is derived from *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* (1927), a short novel by H. P. Lovecraft (1890-1937). Nevertheless, the film remains a collaboration between Corman and Price, and it is based on material by Poe’s most significant literary descendant; once the lines

from Poe's poem are taken into account, *The Haunted Palace* transforms into a Poe adaptation almost in spite of itself.

Having completed four Poe adaptations by the spring of 1963, Corman wanted to try something new. He hit upon the idea of adapting Lovecraft's novel, written in 1927 but unpublished until four years after the author's death. According to Lucy Chase Williams, it was AIP co-founder James H. Nicholson who insisted on changing the film's title out of commercial consideration (185). Undoubtedly the Poe name was more familiar to the public than that of Lovecraft, although the number of casual fans who recognized "The Haunted Palace" as a Poe title was probably very few. Nevertheless, *The Haunted Palace* at least *sounds* more like the name of a horror film than the forensic-sounding *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*. Interestingly, Alain Silver and James Ursini note that at some point during production the picture was called *The Haunted Village*, possibly in an attempt to compromise between the Poe and Lovecraft titles (Roger 206).

The Haunted Palace is reasonably faithful to the Lovecraft novel. The film pertains to Charles Dexter Ward (Price), a kindly nineteenth century businessman who journeys to the mysterious New England village of Arkham to claim his ancestral home. The massive house in question—the "palace" of the title—was brought over from Europe stone by stone by Joseph Curwen, Ward's great-great-grandfather. Unfortunately for Ward and his beautiful young wife, Ann (Debra Paget, a holdover from *Tales of Terror*), Curwen was a sorcerer burned at the stake 110 years earlier, and his restless spirit begins to assume control over his descendant. Ward fights a losing battle for his soul; at the film's end he seems to have reasserted himself, but the baleful look of triumph on his

face and the sinister way Price delivers his final line indicate that Curwen is the final victor after all.

Included as an example of Roderick's verse in "The Fall of the House of Usher," the short poem "The Haunted Palace" uses the imagery of a royal palace to craft an extended metaphor representing the horror and tragedy of madness. Poe describes "a fair and stately palace" erected in "the monarch Thought's dominion" that is ultimately "assailed" by "evil things, in robes of sorrow" (959-960). Eventually the beauty and peace of the palace—a human brain—is destroyed by insanity. At the poem's conclusion, "A hideous throng rush out forever/And laugh—but smile no more" from the brain—a reference to the deranged babbling and laughter emanating from the hopelessly crazed subject (960).

Poe's poem is a brilliant depiction of the way mental illness can destroy a sound mind. While it is supernatural evil, not psychological dysfunction, that is the source of conflict in *The Haunted Palace*, the notion of innocence destroyed by outside malignancy is shared by the poem and the film. Of all the protagonists portrayed by Price in the series, Charles Dexter Ward may well be the most tragic, for he vainly tries to resist his ancestor's dreadful influence until the very end. As Gary Morris points out about Corman's Poe cycle, "the appeal of corruption . . . is always dangerously present for the innocent characters, and sometimes they succumb to it entirely like Charles Dexter Ward" (123-124).

Charles Beaumont wrote the screenplay for *The Haunted Palace* shortly before adapting *The Masque of the Red Death*, and his interest in Lovecraft is clearly indicated

by his efforts to incorporate as much of Lovecraft's material as possible. Beaumont retains most of the important characters' names and the portrait of Joseph Curwen that strikingly resembles Charles Dexter Ward and exerts a malignant influence on the great-great-grandson. Beaumont's script features the hellish underground lair Curwen designs in the novel, and between Corman's atmospheric direction and Daniel Haller's typically elaborate set design, the basement of horrors suggests "some wide gulf of ultimate abomination" (Lovecraft 101).

In fact, certain additions to the script indicate Beaumont's desire to popularize Lovecraft (still very much a minor cult figure in the early Sixties) among general audiences. For example, Beaumont's script is set in Lovecraft's fictional New England town of Arkham; while Lovecraft certainly set many of his stories in Arkham, *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* takes place in the author's very real hometown of Providence, Rhode Island. Similarly, Beaumont goes to great lengths to incorporate references to Lovecraft's famous "Cthulhu Mythos," but the original novel mentions only one of Lovecraft's pantheon, Yog-Sothoth.

Perhaps the most effective scene in *The Haunted Palace* depicts Ward and his wife being accosted by mutated descendants of Joseph Curwen's ghastly attempts to mate human women with monstrous entities. The shots of deformed Arkhamites silently shuffling toward the Wards inspire horror and pity in equal amount, recalling the pathos intermingled with revulsion so prevalent in Tod Browning's *Freaks* (1932). As genuinely unsettling and well-executed as the scene is, it has no antecedent in *The Case*

of *Charles Dexter Ward*; Beaumont borrowed the idea from other Lovecraft stories, particularly “The Dunwich Horror” (1929).

Other changes in Beaumont’s script reflect an effort to make the virtually unfilmable Lovecraft more cinematic. Lovecraft’s Ward bears no physical resemblance to the character portrayed by Vincent Price; the author describes Ward as “tall, slim, and blond, with studious eyes and a slight stoop” who demonstrates “harmless awkwardness rather than attractiveness” and is initially a mere eccentric (10). Price’s Ward, by contrast, is powerfully built, with good posture, dark hair, and full whiskers; he is a perfectly normal, even slightly boring person until Curwen’s possession begins.

The psychic struggle between Ward and Curwen takes place largely off stage in the novel, so Beaumont necessarily places this idea squarely in the foreground. This foregrounding of the battle of wills also serves as a dramatic reference to Poe’s fiction and Corman’s films; as in “The Fall of the House of Usher,” “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar,” and especially “Ligeia,” and particularly in Corman’s adaptations of these stories, the contest of wills symbolizes a struggle against loss of identity and self-determination. Like the stories and earlier films, *The Haunted Palace* suggests a tragic end is inevitable in these conflicts, for the protagonists/victims are always killed or intellectually destroyed, their bodies now possessed by other entities. In a sense, this loss of identity resembles the mental deterioration associated with madness, which in turn is a key theme in the poem from which the film takes its name.

One of Beaumont’s additions to the plot is a familiar trope in horror stories: the conflict between the urban and the rural. As Carol Clover notes, “going from city to

country in horror film is in any case very much like going from village to deep, dark forest in traditional fairy tales” (124). Whereas Lovecraft’s protagonist is initially accepted by his neighbors before his strange experiments alienate them, Beaumont’s version of Ward and his wife experience outright hostility from the moment they step foot in Arkham. To a degree, this is so much a convention of the horror genre that it has descended into a cliché: the ignorant and superstitious villagers frightened and uneasy around strangers who inevitably display the trappings of sophisticated urbanity, including education and material wealth. Ward’s professional success and his desire to claim his large house alludes to the underlying conflict between the rich and the poor; thus *The Haunted Palace* exemplifies Carol Clover’s assertion that “one of the obvious things at stake in the city/country split of horror films . . . is social class” (126). That Arkham has been tainted by the legacy of Joseph Curwen’s forbidden knowledge further underscores rural distrust of excessive “education,” and the Arkhamites fear that the return of his bloodline foreshadows further suffering on their part. The billowing layers of fog that enshroud the village subtly undergird this theme, representing a cloud of ignorance and fear that paralyzes the townspeople while simultaneously contributing to the “dark and brooding atmosphere” Corman conveys throughout the series (Smith 150).

More significantly, Beaumont provides Lovecraft’s young antiquarian bachelor with a wife. Ann’s addition provides an element of sexual danger to the plot, for Joseph Curwen becomes quite lascivious when he gains control of Ward’s body. “Surely a husband has certain rights,” Curwen/Ward remarks to Ann; later he attempts to rape her, claiming he wants “merely to exercise [his] husbandly prerogatives.” These lines

indicate an awareness of the horror inherent in Ann's existence; as a wife in nineteenth-century America, she is little more than property to her husband. The situation is not problematical when Ward is in control of himself—Ann's affection for her husband is clearly depicted, as is his reciprocation of her love and respect when he is in his right mind. However, Ann feels obligated to stay with her apparently deranged husband, both out of a sense of love and in acquiescence to the societal norms that make it her duty to remain.

Curwen/Ward's aggression towards Ann initially recalls Karen Hollinger's assertion that "the traditional maleness of the horror monster can be explained . . . as an expression of the connection between the image of the monster and the filmic representation of castration anxieties" (297). Although Curwen/Ward's unwelcome advances clearly illustrate his cruel and lustful nature, they also suggest the restless spirit's need to assert himself and thus prove he is tangible, physical, and as "real" as his descendant. His incorporeal nature indicates a lack of physical form and thus a lack of body parts—including a phallus. He attacks Ann as much to confirm his sexual vitality—itself a manifestation of physical existence—as to fulfill his inherently wicked nature. Furthermore, Curwen/Ward's assault on Ann serves to undermine her personal autonomy and influence on her husband's better nature. By asserting his control over Ann, Curwen's spirit ensures she will not interfere with his control over Ward.

Because Curwen is Ward's great-great-grandfather, his molestation of Ann symbolizes incest. Yet Curwen's interest in his great-great-granddaughter-in-law seems more sadistic than sexual, for the undead sorcerer spends much of his time trying to

revitalize the corpse of his mistress, Hester Tillinghast (Cathie Marshall). During one of his attempts to revive Hester, Curwen refers to Ann as a “stupid woman” and then observes, “she doesn’t know what it is to love.” Joseph Curwen is capable of genuine romantic attachment; his desire for Hester and obvious anguish over their separation incorporates the Poesque notion of obsessive love for a dead woman not found in Lovecraft’s novel.

The Haunted Palace is a muddled affair in many particulars. A glaring continuity error occurs when friendly Dr. Willet (Frank Maxwell) tells the Wards that Curwen’s atrocities took place “150 years ago,” yet an opening title specifically states that 110 years have passed between Curwen’s execution and the arrival of his descendant in Arkham. At the film’s climax, Dr. Willet rushes into the burning house to save Charles, but when he does so there is no sign of Hester and two other warlocks, Simon Orne (Lon Chaney) and Jabez Hutchinson (Milton Parsons)—yet just a minute earlier they are plainly in the chamber with Ward. These and other shortcomings have earned *The Haunted Palace* little affection among Price scholars. Denis Meikle criticizes the film’s “aimless wanderings through labyrinthine corridors, the endless repetition of key scenes, the loss of narrative direction halfway through, and the botched ending” (113), while Phil Hardy deems it “rich but flawed” (155). On the other hand, Lucy Chase Williams quotes *The Hollywood Reporter* and *Films and Filming*, which judge the film “a class horror picture” and “a powerful and unified surrealist fantasy,” respectively (186).

Certainly the film contains a strong performance by Price in the dual roles. The way the actor subtly modulates his voice when switching between Curwen and Ward is

impressive, as is the malicious gleam in his eyes he adopts when the Curwen persona is dominant. As always, Price's delivery of menacing dialogue is highly effective; as the film ends and the unsuspecting physician comforts what is now Curwen, Price utters the line, "I don't know how I can ever repay you for what you've done, Dr. Willet, but I intend to try" with a degree of mock sincerity that is nothing less than chilling. In her review of *The Haunted Palace*, Judith Crist observes that Price's delivery of a line referencing Torquemada "is almost worth the price of admission alone—but not quite" (qtd. in Smith 150). This left-handed compliment implies awareness of a camp element in Price's performance, yet this assumption is not accurate in regard to anything except a few wittily spooky bits of dialogue. For all intents and purposes, Price's turn as Curwen/Ward is as "straight" as most of his non-comic roles in the Corman films.

Interestingly, the film "became the highest-grossing feature ever released in Australia" at the time because of that country's large number of Lovecraft fans (Parish and Whitney 118). Complemented by a stronger than usual supporting cast—horror veteran Lon Chaney, often condemned for being physically and vocally inappropriate for genre material, is particularly menacing as Simon—*The Haunted Palace* is reasonably effective and deserving of its success. It remains noteworthy as the first cinematic adaptation of Lovecraft, and it is certainly the only film to date that combines elements of Lovecraft with Poe, conveying a reasonable impression of both writers' sense of theme and tone even when not referencing specific characters and plot details.

In the wake of Roger Corman's departure from the franchise, AIP elected to continue the Poe series with another director. Veteran helmer Jacques Tourneur was

brought in based on his success both within the company (his 1964 effort, *The Comedy of Terrors*, was a dark farce inspired by *The Raven* and featured that film's stars—Vincent Price, Peter Lorre, and Boris Karloff—plus Basil Rathbone, Price's co-star in *Tales of Terror*) and without (he directed horror films for legendary producer Val Lewton in the 1940s). Tourneur's most important horror film, *Night of the Demon* (called *Curse of the Demon* in America, 1957), boasted a script by Charles Bennett, whose previous credits included work for Alfred Hitchcock; logically enough, Bennett was brought in to develop a new script with Tourneur. However, the resulting film enjoys a far less sparkling reputation than the previous Tourneur/Bennett collaboration.

War-Gods of the Deep, as the film became known in the United States, was shot in England as *The City Under the Sea*, which remained its British title. The original title is a derivation of "The City in the Sea," itself an 1845 revision of Poe's "The Doomed City" (1831). Set in 1903, the film concerns the efforts of intrepid American scientist Ben Harris (Tab Hunter) and cowardly English artist Harold Tufnell-Jones (David Tomlinson) to rescue pretty Jill Tregillis (Susan Hart) from the clutches of underwater tyrant Sir Hugh Tregathion (Price), an eighteenth century smuggler who has conquered the sunken city of Lyonesse. Now generally called "the Captain," Sir Hugh believes Jill is the reincarnation of his late wife; he and his fellow pirates no longer age thanks to some idiosyncrasy in the sunken city's climate, and Sir Hugh intends to share this virtual immortality with Jill. Eventually Lyonesse is consumed by the volcano, the protagonists escape to the surface, and Sir Hugh dies when he leaves the protective atmosphere of his ruined kingdom.

Nothing in Poe's output remotely resembles this storyline; indeed the plot of *War-Gods of the Deep* is more akin to the science-fiction adventures of Jules Verne, whose *Master of the World* (1961) had been previously lensed by AIP, also with Price in the title role. Nevertheless, Lucy Chase Williams' assertion that the film is "another pseudo-entry in AIP's Poe series which owe[s] next to nothing to the frequently maligned source" (201) isn't quite accurate. While it may be true, as Denis Meikle asserts, that AIP chieftains James H. Nicholson and Samuel Z. Arkoff "felt duty-bound to append some lines of Poe to any film which featured Vincent Price, no matter what the source" (135), *War-Gods of the Deep* does feature distinctly Poesque touches and certainly evidences a stronger association with the author than some of the movies that followed it.

The film opens with a voice-over of Price reciting a few lines from Poe's poem. While this device may at first appear to be a desperate attempt to connect to Poe, it is one of several allusions to the American author sprinkled throughout the production. Lines and ideas from the poem abound, such as a terrified fisherman's observation of "red in the sea, like blood-color," which recalls Poe's line, "The waves have now a redder glow" (964). Elsewhere, Sir Hugh refers to himself as "Death looking gigantically down" on his underwater subjects, a paraphrase of Poe's couplet, "While from a proud tower in the town/Death looks gigantically down" (964). Sir Hugh also refers to his underwater world as a "maelstrom," which alludes to Poe's story "A Descent into the Maelstrom," itself announced as one of the dozen productions being considered at the same time Tourneur's film went before the cameras (Meikle 134).

The film's set design incorporates many elements inspired by the artwork of antiquity, including hieroglyphics, friezes, and statuary clearly intended to suggest the artifacts of ancient Egypt. Although the poem itself contains no direct reference to the Egyptians, it does contain descriptions of domes, spires, "kingly halls" and "Babylon-like walls" (964). Thus the film is designed with the ancient appearance of Poe's underwater city in mind, a design choice every bit as valid as the art direction incorporated into previous AIP Poe adaptations.

Beyond quotations from the poem, Tourneur's film incorporates thematic references to Poe's output and previous entries in the AIP series. Sir Hugh follows in the tradition of Nicholas Medina, Erasmus Craven, and other Price characters by mourning his long-dead wife. Unlike the haunted protagonists of *Pit and the Pendulum* et al, Sir Hugh's mourning is not suffused with dread; there is no evidence that his dead Beatrice was evil or unfaithful. As a result, Sir Hugh's fascination with Jill becomes subtly pathetic, not horrific; the cruel irony that he can live forever but his wife cannot is the sort of dark romantic tragedy Poe includes in such poems of loss as "The Raven" and "Lenore." Interestingly, Charles Bennett's script includes a scene in which Ben and Harold discover a "first English edition" of Poe's poetry among Sir Hugh's treasures; the undying smuggler, of course, has dog-eared the page upon which "The City in the Sea" is printed. This bit of business is an early example of postmodern self-reference in the series, an element that becomes increasingly prevalent in the films that follow.

On yet another level does *War-Gods of the Deep* append itself to Poe thematically, although so subtly that the filmmakers themselves probably didn't fully

appreciate it. Like Roderick Usher, M. Valdemar, and others, Sir Hugh is a relic of sorts. He represents a bygone era, a time in which men of aristocratic heritage assumed dominion over others as a matter of course. Again and again in Poe's stories and especially in the cinematic adaptations, men of wealth and influence live on, the hegemony of their class still extant within the boundaries of tiny, self-determined kingdoms that do not reflect the transformations in society at large. That these characters do not adapt to the social and psychological changes afoot in the real world is the ultimate wellspring of conflict, of madness, of horror, and ultimately of the destruction of the characters themselves.

Thus Sir Hugh Tregathion used his status as an aristocrat to cover his smuggling at the dawn of the nineteenth century; when he and his men fled to Lyonesse, he assumed tyrannical control over that realm by virtue of his standing as an aristocrat. By the time the events of the film unfold in 1903, Sir Hugh has no doubt that it is perfectly acceptable to kidnap Jill because she reminds him of his departed beloved. His survival over the course of three centuries is only possible because the station to which he was born has been preserved only by a freakish aberration of nature. It is significant that this aberration takes place not only far from the "real" world, but among the ruins of a lost city—itsself a relic by the time Sir Hugh stumbled upon it in 1803.

War-Gods of the Deep/The City Under the Sea does not enjoy the critical and popular affection reserved for so many of Vincent Price's Poe adaptations. Michael Weldon calls it a "dull and unconvincing adventure film" (761); Denis Meikle concludes that only the star's presence lends "some gravitas to the otherwise puerile proceedings"

(138). It is perhaps improperly catalogued as a horror film, although the appearance of the “fish men” Sir Hugh includes among his subjects adds an element of the monstrous to the plot. Certainly the wooden acting of co-star Tab Hunter and the annoying comic relief provided by David Tomlinson (at the time quite a catch for AIP thanks to his recent co-starring turn in *Mary Poppins* for Disney) and his pet chicken, Herbert, undermine the serious atmosphere Tourneur and Bennett establish in the film’s opening scenes. Nevertheless, it is a mistake to deny the film’s inclusion on a list of Poe adaptations or to omit Sir Hugh Tregathion on any accounting of Vincent Price’s Poesque characterizations.

Any survey of the Poe/Price series must note *An Evening of Edgar Allan Poe* (1972), a TV special produced by AIP and starring Vincent Price. Running less than an hour, the special serves as a one-man show for the star, who acts out a quartet of Poe’s stories: “The Tell-Tale Heart,” “The Sphinx,” “The Cask of Amontillado,” and “The Pit and the Pendulum.” Although a low-budget affair shot on video, *An Evening of Edgar Allan Poe* is noteworthy as the most “pure” cinematic adaptation of the author’s work, if only because writer/director/producer Kenneth Johnson—later to specialize in TV science fiction projects such as *V* (1983)—merely edits the stories so the star can perform them as a series of vignettes. What results is an appropriate farewell to Poe from the star and the production company. Interestingly, this project was for many years rarely broadcast and difficult to see—at least one fan magazine has claimed it was a “lost” film—but upon its DVD release in 2003, it became widely available and is frequently screened in literature classes for its faithful treatment of the source material.

Price's success in the AIP Gothics was duly noted by other film companies, and in 1962 the actor signed with an outfit called Admiral Pictures. An operation so impoverished it made American International seem like a major studio by comparison, Admiral rather blatantly swiped the AIP formula for a trio of thrillers with literary roots similar to those in the Poe films. Roger Corman temporarily bolted from AIP to produce and direct *Tower of London*, an adaptation of *Richard III* so loose that "what survives [of Shakespeare's play] is so little that its occasional occurrence almost evokes surprise" (Pendleton 140). A very young Vincent Price had played a supporting role in Universal's 1939 production of *Tower of London*, so it was appropriate the now middle-aged thespian toplined the new version, essaying the part of Richard originally played by Basil Rathbone. Corman soon returned to the AIP fold, so writer-producer Robert E. Kent took over the remaining Price projects: *Diary of a Madman*, directed by Reginald Le Borg from a story by Guy de Maupassant; and *Twice Told Tales*, directed by Sidney Salkow and based on the tales of Nathaniel Hawthorne.

Clearly inspired by AIP's success with the Poe-based anthology *Tales of Terror*, *Twice Told Tales* presented a trio of Hawthorne's weird tales to a modern audience that probably knew the writer only for *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). A contemporary and admirer of Poe, Hawthorne (1804-1864) emphasizes moral lessons in his horror fiction, often suffusing his stories with a wry humor not found in Poe's most significant tales. For *Twice Told Tales* producer Kent chose to adapt "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment" (oddly the only adaptation taken from the actual Hawthorne collection that inspired the film's title), "Rappaccini's Daughter," and a condensed version of Hawthorne's novel *The*

House of the Seven Gables, which like *Tower of London* was a remake of a vehicle from Price's early career at Universal. The results, while intermittently interesting, are ultimately less effective than the AIP Poe films because Kent's script and Salkow's direction are far more pedestrian than the early efforts from the Matheson-Corman team.

"Dr. Heidegger's Experiment" is a tale of old age temporarily reversed by an elixir of youth. On his seventy-ninth birthday, Dr. Carl Heidegger celebrates with his best friend, Alex Medbourne (Price). A raging thunderstorm damages the crypt of Sylvia (Mari Blanchard), Carl's long-dead fiancée. When the two old men investigate, they discover Sylvia's body to be remarkably well-preserved due to its exposure to a mysterious liquid dripping from the roof of the crypt. Realizing the liquid can turn back the ravages of time, Carl distills a potion that restores his friend and himself to their youthful appearances, then experiments on Sylvia's body, bringing her back to life. As it turns out, Alex spitefully poisoned Sylvia on the eve of her wedding to Carl; soon the two old friends are fighting over the woman they both love, spilling the vial of youth serum. During the struggle Alex accidentally kills Carl, then watches in horror as the serum's effects wear off. Sylvia's fate is worse; she dies a second time, reduced to the crumbling skeleton she ought to be after thirty-eight years in a grave.

As an adaptation of Hawthorne's story, "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment" is reasonably faithful, although significant changes are necessary to propel the plot and establish the romantic triangle. Hawthorne's story involves four elderly acquaintances of Heidegger being temporarily restored by drinking from the Fountain of Youth of legend, but Heidegger himself chooses to remain old. Heidegger does mention the loss of his

fiancée, Sylvia, fifty-five years earlier, but no attempt is made to revive the dead woman. Nobody literally dies in the story, but all four of Heidegger's subjects are "melancholy old creatures . . . whose greatest misfortune it [is] that they [are] not long ago in their graves"—in other words, their ruined and wasted lives have reduced them to figurative death (1). Once restored, the three old men resume their bickering over who will marry the Widow Wycherly, whom they all once loved. The lesson here is that old age and experience are not certain to provide wisdom and understanding.

Hawthorne's basic message about not learning from one's mistakes is abandoned entirely in Kent's script, replaced by a Poesque obsession with a beautiful dead woman. In the wake of Heidegger and Sylvia's passing Alex is left to mourn the loss of his best friend and the love of his life, essentially condemned to the sort of metaphorical living death Hawthorne mentions at the beginning of his tale—a fate that recalls that of many brooding Poe protagonists, especially in the Corman films. By contrast, Hawthorne's bitter old quartet decides to "make a pilgrimage to Florida, and quaff at morning, noon, and night from the Fountain of Youth" (9), having yet to learn anything from Heidegger's experiment. There is no doubt Price's Alex has learned from his experience, sorrowful though that knowledge might be.

The most intriguing element in Kent's adaptation of the story is a peculiar emphasis on aberrant romantic connections (also found in Poe's output). The illicit passion between Alex and Sylvia is complicated by conflicting emotions. Both parties are tormented by their betrayal of Carl, and Alex is torn between his enthusiastic and lifelong bachelorhood and his apparent second chance at true love. "Nothing ever

stopped me from living exactly the kind of life that I wanted,” Alex tells Carl to explain his determination never to marry, yet Alex has resorted to murder to prevent Sylvia from marrying another man. “You love to take all a woman has to offer, then refuse to marry her,” Sylvia accuses,” to which Alex snidely replies, “you gave yourself to me”—an allusion to Sylvia’s complicity in the affair. Yet this time Alex intends to marry Sylvia, urging her to leave Carl and run away with him.

Even more noteworthy is the early relationship between Carl and Alex. Although there is no textual evidence of a homosexual relationship between the two elderly friends, their connection is clearly deep and abiding, similar to that of a happily married old couple. Only the two of them have gathered to commemorate Carl’s birthday, and Alex playfully complains that it is only his affection for his friend that makes him come out on such a storm-tossed night. In his delight following exposure to the elixir’s benefits, Carl immediately insists that Alex join him in recapturing youth; only later does he attempt to revive Sylvia. After his best friend and his true love have perished, Alex berates the now dried-up spring: “You’ve taken Carl and Sylvia away from me,” he moans, placing priority on his relationship to the doctor by mentioning his name first. Clearly Alex and Carl are bound together on an emotionally intimate level; they are in terms of gender performance putatively heterosexual life partners whose idyllic existence is sundered by the intrusion of a woman, suggesting frustration at the idea of a “real” woman compromising their relationship and recalling the many romantic triangles of the AIP films.

Written in 1844, Hawthorne's story "Rappaccini's Daughter" concerns Beatrice, the daughter of a brilliant but eccentric botanist in sixteenth century Padua, Italy. Rappaccini has utilized his scientific prowess to develop new strains of poisonous plants "no longer of God's making, but the monstrous offspring of man's depraved fancy, glowing with only an evil mockery of beauty" (Hawthorne 48). Furthermore, the scientist has exposed his child to his poisonous concoctions, rendering her touch and even her breath deadly to any living thing that gets too close to her. Giovanni, a medical student, falls in love with Beatrice but cannot engage in physical contact with her. Professor Baglioni, Giovanni's teacher and Rappaccini's chief rival, offers an antidote for the girl's condition, but it kills her instead. The story ends with Baglioni castigating his rival, sarcastically asking Rappaccini "'is this the upshot of your experiment?'" (Hawthorne 59).

"Rappaccini's Daughter" is the most faithful of Kent's adaptations. Kent includes such details as the purple hue that colors the flesh of those creatures unfortunate enough to feel Beatrice's touch, and he mentions Giovanni's arrival in Padua from Naples. Indeed, the episode differs significantly from the story in only two particulars: the cinematic Giovanni (Brett Halsey, Price's co-star in 1959's *Return of the Fly*) displays none of the ambivalent attraction-repulsion with which the literary Giovanni regards Beatrice, and the film eschews Hawthorne's rivalry between Baglioni and Rappaccini that provides the story with its ironic ending. It is the omission of the Baglioni/Rappaccini feud that eliminates Hawthorne's most obvious moral, a warning against unethical and unsupervised scientific experimentation. However, the excision of

the crucial subplot allows Kent to develop a more provocative theme: the incestuous connection between Rappaccini (Price) and Beatrice (Joyce Taylor).

Merely hinted at by Hawthorne, whose Rappaccini asks his daughter if she “prefer[s] the condition of a weak woman, exposed to all evil and capable of none” (59), the idea that the scientist suffers from an unhealthy affection for Beatrice is demonstrated frequently in Kent’s script. Price’s Rappaccini remarks to his daughter that “you will never understand how fortunate you are that none of the world’s sin can touch you,” which echoes Hawthorne’s reference to “all evil.” These references to “evil” and “sin” are vague, but the absence of Rappaccini’s wife in both story and film suggests that Beatrice has replaced her mother in her father’s life on many levels and subtly associates sexuality with evil. Of course Rappaccini realizes intellectually that committing incest is wrong. Emotionally, however, the overzealous scientist cannot share his daughter with another man, so he poisons her system to prevent both himself and other males from touching her. “But all our years together! It can’t be ended because of that boy,” the cinematic Rappaccini complains to his daughter in the most blatant admission of his unacceptable love for her. These expressions of incestuous feelings and the guilt associated with them are very similar to those displayed in such AIP Poe films as *House of Usher* and *Pit and the Pendulum*.

The film’s incorporation of Beatrice’s enforced chastity is especially significant, as it is established early on that Rappaccini’s wife deserted him and their young daughter to be with her lover. Thus the botanist’s obsession is not merely incestuous in nature but vengeful as well; Rappaccini transfers his love and need for revenge from his unnamed

wife to his daughter. Eventually—and illogically given his previous opposition to their union—the movie version of Rappaccini resorts to his literary antecedent's plot to imbue Giovanni with the same poisons that infect Beatrice, allowing the younger man to “make her [his] wife.” This decision sets in motion the episode's conclusion: Giovanni drinks the antidote prepared by Baglioni (played by Abraham Sofaer earlier but absent at the conclusion), but it kills the young man (just as it slays Beatrice in the story). Beatrice destroys herself by consuming the remainder of the antidote, and the distraught Rappaccini also commits suicide, intentionally grabbing the blooms of his deadliest creation (the source of the poison that contaminates Beatrice). As in his take on “Dr. Heidegger's Experiment,” Kent chooses to solve a bizarre romantic triangle by killing off all the interested parties, the grim and inevitable results of transgressive sexual and romantic longings.

The version of *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) that concludes *Twice Told Tales* is the least faithful of the episodes, due in large part to the brief running time the movie's anthology format demands. Most of the book's characters are jettisoned, but the central character of Gerald Pyncheon (called “Jaffrey” in the novel and played here by Price) remains, as does Gerald's spinster sister, here renamed “Hannah” in place of “Hepzibah” (Jacqueline de Wit). The centuries-old conflict between the Pyncheons and the Maule family is retained, as is the novel's quest to uncover various legal documents that bestow great wealth, which becomes the focus of the story. More overt supernatural elements are appended, including walls that run red with blood and the appearance of a none-too-convincing skeletal hand, which strangles Gerald at the episode's climax.

Hawthorne's abrupt happy ending is replaced with a similarly unremarkable conclusion: Gerald's long-suffering wife, Alice (Beverly Garland), winds up in the embrace of the last Maule, Jonathan (Richard Denning), and the haunted house of the seven gables collapses ala the house of Usher.

In its brevity the final episode of *Twice Told Tales* lacks even the rudimentary character development that contributes to the earlier sections of the film. Price's Gerald Pyncheon is a static character, a stereotypical villain who torments his innocent young wife and murders his admittedly unpleasant sister to keep from sharing the wealth with her. There is no love lost between Gerald and Alice, and a tantalizing detail suggests that their loveless marriage is also sexless: Alice insists upon taking a separate room when she and her husband arrive at his ancestral home. When Gerald realizes his wife is falling for Maule, he bitterly demands, "are you ready to open doors for Jonathan that you've kept locked to me?"

The sexual conflict between the film's third romantic triangle is more obvious but less radical than in the previous episodes; other than the startling shots of walls, ceilings, and portraits weeping blood, this conflict provides the only relief from the tedium otherwise pervasive in this Hawthorne adaptation. The author's message that "the act of the passing generation is the germ which may and must produce good or evil in a far-distant time" (2) survives, but only by the hardest. Although more faithful to its sources than many of AIP's productions are to Poe, *Twice Told Tales* is ultimately hamstrung by a fatal combination of uneven performances, dreadful special effects in the final episode (the house is patently a cheap model, the skeletal hand is laughably fake), and Sidney

Salkow's listless direction. Nevertheless, the film demonstrates the influence of the Poe-Price-Corman franchise on other producers and provides a contrast in quality that further enhances the charm of the early entries in the AIP series.

In 1962, Roger Corman became embroiled in a financial dispute with AIP founders Arkoff and Nicholson. As a result, Corman decided to make his third Poe adaptation for the Pathe film processing lab, which was interested in going into film distribution. However, as Beverly Gray explains,

When Sam Arkoff got wind of this arrangement, which threatened the AIP monopoly on the highly lucrative Poe films, he warned that AIP would retaliate by withdrawing its business from Pathe's respected film laboratory. [Pathe] capitulated, and Corman was surprised to see Nicholson and Arkoff show up on the set of *The Premature Burial*, cheerfully informing him that he was once again working for them. (76)

The Premature Burial (sometimes referred to with the definite article omitted, as Corman left it off in the film's credits) is the only one of Corman's Poe adaptations in which Vincent Price does not appear. In his place, Corman cast another aging former romantic lead, Ray Milland, as Sir Guy Carrell, a British aristocrat who calls off his engagement to the beautiful Emily (Hazel Court in the first of her three Poe appearances for the director) because of his morbid fear of being buried alive. Eventually Emily convinces Guy to marry her after all, but soon a series of terrifying dreams and other phenomena cause Guy to fall into a cataleptic state. Guy is in fact interred, but grave robbers immediately and inadvertently free him. Guy goes on a rampage, electrocuting

Emily's anatomist father before subjecting Emily to premature burial. Family physician (and Emily's true love) Miles (Richard Ney) intervenes but is too late to save Emily; Guy's sister, Kate (Heather Angel) shows up and shoots her brother. In the picture's hasty conclusion, Kate explains that Emily married Guy for his money, then played upon his irrational fears to drive him into a cataleptic fit.

The Premature Burial is a misfit in the series for many reasons, not the least of which is Price's absence from the proceedings. A capable actor and Oscar winner (for his starring turn in *The Lost Weekend*) who ultimately chalked up enough horror film credits to earn acknowledgment as a minor genre star (Brosnan 278-279), Ray Milland simply doesn't have the screen presence or the voice for Gothic material. His lines are delivered in an almost somnambulistic tone—perhaps appropriate given the character's obsession with catalepsy—and his relationship with Hazel Court seems less believable than the May-December romances Price carried on with young actresses in his films.

Then again, the script by fantasy specialists Charles Beaumont and Ray Russell doesn't give Milland much to work with. *The Premature Burial* is talky and slow-moving, featuring less action and fewer shock sequences than the previous Poe adaptations. In perhaps the screenplay's most egregious shortcoming, there's no explanation for Guy's sudden realization that Emily is the actual culprit in the plot. Furthermore, Guy's sister knew the truth "but held her tongue because she was afraid Guy wouldn't believe her unless she had some proof, which is a pretty lame excuse for doing nothing," as Mark Thomas McGee rightly observes (141).

In spite of the film's weaknesses, it is not wholly without interest. Corman's sure directorial sense provides some fascinating camera angles, and the atmosphere of the Carrell estate is unquestionably ominous—once again a testament to Floyd Crosby's cinematography and Daniel Haller's sets. The constantly billowing fog and the desiccated flora contribute to landscape as deathly as the obsessions that motivate Guy. A fine score by Ronald Stein, who provided the music to several Corman productions during this period, is another mood-establishing highlight. Beaumont and Russell make little use of Poe's story, but they do provide Guy with a lengthy monologue that includes Poe's evocative description of the sensations of living burial (quoted in full in Chapter VIII). As with so many of the later Poe films, an impression of Poe's themes is conveyed even when the details of his stories are omitted.

In thematic terms, *The Premature Burial* is reasonably successful at conveying the metaphoric connotations of Guy Carrell's obsessions. In a sense, Guy is already "buried alive" as the film opens: his obsession stems from his conviction that his own father was interred prematurely, a particularly morbid notion wholly in keeping with Poe's tradition of unstable protagonists given to similarly bizarre fixations. More significantly, Guy's mania is associated with his family; as in *House of Usher* and *The Pit and the Pendulum*, the protagonist of *The Premature Burial* wages a losing battle with a long tradition of madness and death within his own bloodline. Similar to Corman's Gothic works, a protagonist once again leads an apparently innocent younger person (in this case, Emily) on a tour of a subterranean lair, in this case the Carrell catacombs. This symbolic journey into the subconscious—one of Corman's most important

acknowledgments of his debt to Freudian theory—concludes with Guy lecturing Emily on the horrific deaths his ancestors have inevitably faced. Guy remarks on the immutability of his fate as an explanation for why he cannot marry and father children to perpetuate the family—another notion borrowed from *House of Usher*.

The sense that the protagonist's way of life is itself outmoded and "dead" that underscores Corman's Poe films is present in *The Premature Burial* as well. An aristocrat during the rapid socioeconomic changes of the nineteenth century, Guy Carrell mopes around his ancient estate, rarely interacting with the reality beyond his small and obsolete world. The relevance of Guy's "burial" within a changing world beyond his ken or control is personally relevant to Jayne Anne Phillips, who associates this "scion of a dwindling Victorian family" with her own experience growing up and escaping from a dreary West Virginia coal town (43). The suffocation of progress, then, is akin to the suffocation of death.

It is significant that Emily, a product of an apparently respectable but indisputably bourgeois family, is herself dedicated to acquiring a fortune by any means necessary; "you always wanted to be a great lady," Miles observes, a reference to her earlier refusal to marry him because he lacked wealth (and a foreshadowing of Emily's real purpose). Emily's greed and ruthlessness in her pursuit of wealth may be evil, but there is also an element of self-preservation inherent in her quest; without an independent source of income, Emily would be entirely at the mercy of a culture in which women are already repressed and limited by numerous factors. Court's turn as Emily foreshadows her role

as Lenore in *The Raven*, another ambitious female who plots to use male lovers as tools to overcome female oppression within a patriarchal social system.

In her quest for upward social mobility, Emily herself, it is implied, is as fixed on her obsessions as Guy is with his; the fact that their mutual obsessions lead to their mutual destruction is highly ironic and suggests an inherent and irrepressible conflict between the middle and upper classes. Gary Morris notes that Emily is frequently depicted hovering over her prostrate husband, an image that conveys “a connotation of smothering” (110) akin to the suffocation inevitably following premature burial. In its depiction of a man oppressed by the nature of his decaying status and unbreakable bonds to family and social traditions firmly rooted in the past, *The Premature Burial* does succeed in making the horror of live burial—itsself a virtual impossibility by 1962 due to modern medical practices—an effective metaphor for the burial of the individual under the weight of both past and present anxieties.

Two more titles require acknowledgement, if not extensive discussion: *Spirits of the Dead* (1969) and *Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1971). Originally lensed two years before its American release, *Spirits of the Dead* (original title: *Histoires Extraordinaires*) is a French-Italian co-production boasting the participation of three leading European directors (Roger Vadim, Louis Malle, Federico Fellini) and an internationally renowned cast (Jane and Peter Fonda, Brigitte Bardot, Terence Stamp) in an upscale arthouse interpretation of three lesser Poe tales (“Metzengerstein,” “William Wilson,” and “Never Bet the Devil Your Head”). Yet in spite of its impressive pedigree, the movie is neither particularly engaging nor especially entertaining; talky, ponderous, and dull, *Spirits of the*

Dead “lacks the polish, style, and solid terror of the best Roger Corman contributions to the Edgar Allan Poe series,” as John Mahoney rightly observed (qtd. in Lucy Chase Williams 220).

Nevertheless, the film warrants inclusion because AIP did buy the rights to release the film in the United States; therefore, it was promoted at the time as an entry in the franchise. To bridge the gap between “legitimate” AIP Poe productions and this strange European effort, Vincent Price was brought in to recite a few verses from “Spirits of the Dead,” an early poem that first appeared as “Visit of the Dead” in *Tammerlane and Other Poems* (1827), Poe’s first collection, to justify the American title. Price’s narration includes the first and last verses of the poem, including the memorable couplet “Thy soul shall find itself alone/’Mid dark thoughts of the gray tombstone” (Poe 1016). In all, Price’s contribution to the film lasts exactly 27 seconds, according to Lucy Chase Williams (220). Although the American version, dubbed into English, still circulates as a TV print, the version of *Spirits of the Dead* easily accessed on video is the subtitled European cut—without Price’s recitations.

The final AIP Poe feature, *Murders in the Rue Morgue*, represents a concentrated but ultimately vain attempt to till new ground. Once again director Gordon Hessler and screenwriter Christopher Wicking (writing in collaboration with veteran mystery and soap opera specialist Henry Slesar) were assigned the task of adapting a Poe classic for the screen, but for the first time Vincent Price was not part of the deal. The actor was exhausted with the series, with AIP, and with the direction of his career in general. Jason Robards signed on to play Charron, the leader of a French acting troupe that specializes

in recreations of Poe's most famous mystery. Members of the troupe fall prey to a mysterious disfigured killer, apparently one of their fellows who allegedly died years earlier.

Murders in the Rue Morgue benefits from particularly fine costume and set designs and a stronger than usual (for AIP) cast. Veteran thespians Herbert Lom, Lilli Palmer, Michael Dunn, and Adolfo Celi lend credible support to Robards, and several visual and thematic references to the 1932 adaptation featuring Bela Lugosi indicate a desire to foreground the film within a rich and comparatively obscure offshoot of cinematic horror tradition. The allusions to the earlier version, coupled with the use of "Murders in the Rue Morgue" as a plot device rather than the movie's actual plot, further develops the self-reflexivity and postmodern tendencies that inform the series beginning at least as far back as *War-Gods of the Deep*. Certainly the film has its admirers: Phil Hardy concludes that it is "... Hessler's finest achievement to date" and enthusiastically defends the story's

intriguingly layered form which ultimately comes to represent the movement of fantasy itself, with its constant shifts from one level to another . . . In this way the boundaries between fantasy and reality are totally blurred, suggesting they cannot be distinguished since each is shaped under the determining pressures of the other . . . the film's final sequences [are] lifted to the level of surrealist poetry. (237)

A number of slow-motion dream sequences seem to inform Hardy's assessment of the film, but in actuality these elements serve merely to further erode the glacier-like

pace. Like *Cry of the Banshee*, *Murders in the Rue Morgue* is talky and seems much longer than its official 87-minute running time; the plot twists are so unlikely as to expose the film to charges of absurdism more easily than surrealism. Most damning of all is a singularly ineffectual leading performance by Robards. Hailed as one of the finest stage actors of his generation, Robards seems absolutely incapable of delivering his lines with anything approaching conviction, and his wooden performance cannot help but inspire comparisons to Vincent Price, whose tendency to overplay silly parts would at least enliven the Charron character. Ultimately Robards cannot imbue his character with either verisimilitude or a camp aesthetic. Bearing little actual resemblance to Poe's original mystery in either detail or theme, *Murders in the Rue Morgue* is in the final analysis an interesting failure and a disappointing end to one of the most popular and intriguing horror franchises in cinematic history.

Chapter X

“A Play of Hopes and Fears”: Conclusions

Although the tales of Edgar Allan Poe have been adapted for the cinema since the medium's infancy, it is the series of films produced by American International Pictures between 1960 and 1972 that represent the only significant effort to establish a franchise of Poe movies. As such, the series is a significant representation of the author's influence on popular culture and evidence of his relevance and recognition among modern audiences. Furthermore, the films constitute a major portion of the films made by AIP and directed by Roger Corman; they are also numbered among the key films that star Vincent Price and contribute substantially to his reputation as one of the most important horror stars in cinematic history.

In his influential survey of the modern terror film, *American Horrors*, Gregory Waller claims that the early 1960s were

dominated by horror films much safer and more formulaic . . . like [the AIP] adaptations of Edgar Allan Poe stories . . . peopled by inspired, grandly theatrical, often middle-aged villains; well-meaning, innocuous, young male heroes; and buxom young women waiting to be ravished or rescued. Blending an unambiguous style with easily decoded themes and 'messages,' these films are often small-scale social fables that reveal certain correctable flaws in the . . . worlds they depict. (257)

Waller's description of the iconography of these films may be accurate, but his reading of their significance is off the mark. As this study has suggested, there are far more complicated and conflicting messages about sexuality, the family unit, and sociopolitical cultural constructions than Waller admits. Granted, a considerable number of themes and motifs are reiterated throughout the series, perhaps a sufficient number to make the series seem "formulaic." Nevertheless, there seems little justification for the claim that these films are "safer" just because they are not as explicit as Waller's primary concerns, the graphic and more obviously transgressive films that appeared in the wake of *Rosemary's Baby* and *Night of the Living Dead* in 1968. There is more to the series than is apparent from cursory viewing. Perhaps it is their derivation from classic literature that makes the Poe series seem "tame" to Waller, but clearly the subversive commentary on class and gender encoded within the films is transgressive and provides insight into the sexual and social politics of the era in which the films were made.

Nevertheless, the most surprising realization that a close reading of the AIP Poe series offers is how faithful the entries are to the spirit, if not the letter, of the source material. Walter Kendrick is simply wrong when he dismisses the Poe cycle by asserting that Corman "turned Poe's stories back into the run-of-the-mill pulp they sprang from" and is concerned only with "the look, not the logic" of the source material (237). Certainly the first couple of efforts most resemble the sources, taking into account the modifications necessary to craft feature-length productions based on brief stories written long before the concept of motion picture adaptation emerged. Yet even films of later vintage that seem to borrow a title and nothing else from Poe, are nevertheless informed

by an awareness of the thematic and iconographic underpinnings of the author's work. It may well be that this awareness is derived more from the earlier entries in the AIP series than by anything specifically described in Poe's fiction and poetry, but even this theory admits the influence of the source material, even at a distant remove, on each of the sixteen movies discussed in this study.

Even when a film is made by different personnel from the usual AIP crew and originated with absolutely no idea of referencing Poe, as in the case of *Witchfinder General/The Conqueror Worm*, there is a thematic association with the author. The notion that Sam Arkoff and Jim Nicholson simply affixed a Poe title to the Michael Reeves film with no other consideration in mind other than profit has been disproved by Arkoff's own testimony and by an examination of how Reeves' worldview neatly corresponds to Poe's *Weltanschauung*. It is true that AIP *forced* a Poe connection onto *Witchfinder General*—but it is also true that the device used to forge the connection is *appropriate*.

Each of the entries is foregrounded in an awareness of Poe's thematic concerns. Premature burial is an obvious dramatic element in the film of that title, but the concept is also more or less crucial to the plots of *House of Usher*, *The Pit and the Pendulum*, *Tales of Terror* ("The Black Cat" episode), and *The Oblong Box*. The significance of will power and its relationship to hypnosis is contemplated in the "Case of M. Valdemar" episode of *Tales of Terror*, *The Haunted Palace*, and *The Tomb of Ligeia*. The pursuit of revenge against a perceived wrongdoer is crucial to the storylines of *The Pit and the Pendulum*, "The Black Cat" episode of *Tales of Terror*, *The Conqueror Worm*, *The*

Oblong Box, and *Cry of the Banshee*; the theme emerges to a lesser degree in most of the other films as well. Most significantly, all of the films are concerned with death, and all concern themselves to a greater or lesser extent with female characters.

Stephen Neale identifies “an intimate relationship [that] seems to exist among the filmic presentation of the horror monster, the castration anxiety it evokes, and the cinematic representation of the female form” (qtd. in Hollinger 296), and this theory is apparent in the Poe films where the attractive but deadly women are the monsters, challenging male hegemony and threatening to subvert rigidly defined gender roles. In turn, the subversion of masculine gender saps the male characters of intellectual, social, and sexual authority, further contributing to the collapse of performatively male identity. These subversive tendencies exist even when women are depicted as protagonists, as in the case of Rowena in *The Tomb of Ligeia*.

Interestingly, comparatively few of Poe’s major female characters are clearly identified as victims; the narrator’s wife in “The Black Cat” is unnamed and is a comparatively minor contributor to the action, other than through her association with the feline of the title. Therefore, the AIP films often create or modify females for Price to menace. Madeline Usher, Elizabeth Medina, and Emily Gault are the only female leads in the films clearly vilified, victimized, and venerated in relatively equal measure. Ligeia/Rowena, Elizabeth Shepherd’s dual characters in *The Tomb of Ligeia*, is/are more difficult to identify because she/they are two different women who ultimately merge into one being. Thus the Ligeia persona is vilified and venerated, but never victimized; Rowena is certainly a victim and is venerated, more or less, by the male characters, but

she is never identified as a villain. Only a few leading female characters are portrayed unambiguously; even victims like Francesca in *The Masque of the Red Death* and Sarah Lowes in *The Conqueror Worm* are portrayed as women to be venerated, for they are held up as idealized women by Prospero and Richard Marshall, respectively. Significantly, the less ambiguous female leads, such as Elizabeth Markham in *The Oblong Box*, are less complex and therefore less memorable. Thus it is the degree of ambivalence in their depiction that makes the women of the Poe series intriguing and worthy of analysis.

As Steven Thornton has noted, women in the Poe series demonstrate a gradual growth as individuals:

Pathetic Madeline Usher is the doormat of the bunch, failing to exhibit any personal initiative until her options have been restricted by a closed coffin lid. Both Elizabeth Medina and Lenore Craven improve on this approach somewhat by taking their affairs into their own hands . . . Francesca and Juliana demonstrate even further progress by using the powers of their higher consciousness to influence the people around them. Finally, Lady Rowena . . . becomes a virtual role model for today's generation of post-liberated women. (241)

Thornton's survey ends with Corman's last contribution to the series; perhaps as a result of this change in creative direction, the developmental trend Thornton describes is not continued in the films helmed by Gordon Hessler. Neither Elizabeth Markham nor Maureen Whitman demonstrates any measurable growth; Elizabeth is a totally static

dysfunctional family before dying unredeemed. Hilary Dwyer's first and foremost characterization, as Sarah in *The Conqueror Worm*, is unique in that she regresses from innocent country girl to ostensible willing victim before ultimately disintegrating into madness, destroyed along with her family, her fiancée, and her conceptions of justice and injustice—the intellectual and emotional components of her innocence.

The fate of Sarah Lowes is perhaps the most tragic example of the cultural horror experienced by the women in the Poe series. Even when the Price characters treat their distaff associates with kindness and love, these women remain oppressed by the patriarchal societies around them. Barbara Creed describes

The concept of a border [that] is central to the construction of the monstrous in the horror film; that which crosses or threatens to cross the 'border' is abject. Although the specific nature of the border changes from film to film, the function of the monstrous remains the same: to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability. (40)

The women in the Poe series dwell on this threshold between order and chaos, often inspiring or setting into motion the sequence of events that inevitably ends in death and madness because they deliberately or inadvertently challenge the assumptions or expectations placed on them by their environments. Poe's women, and hence the women in these films, are frequently depicted in catatonic or hypnotized states. Thus they are exemplify the abject as Creed defines it in the sense of the limnal, the corpse, and the chthonic. Sometimes they are controlled from beyond the grave, as in the case of Helene

chthonic. Sometimes they are controlled from beyond the grave, as in the case of Helene Valdemar. Annabel Herringbone is brutally murdered for cuckolding her dissipated husband even after years of patient and loving acquiescence to his cruel tyranny; her terrible death is an “acceptable” punishment for daring to transgress against Montresor’s “rights” as a man and assumed head of the household.

The least sympathetic of the female characters are still victimized by the repressive sociopolitical constructs in which they exist. Elizabeth Medina is possessed by the sexual insanity that haunts Castillo Medina, itself the product of a rigid patriarchal code established and enforced by her late father-in-law and his fellow members of the Inquisition. Lenore Craven seduces Erasmus and later Scarabus because it is her only means to gain a measure of power and independence in either the real or the magical realms, as both societies are dominated by male hegemony. It is only through marital or sexual alliance to older, aristocratic men—Sir Guy Carrell and Prince Prospero, respectively—that Emily Gault and Juliana can be assured of continual financial and personal security; it is their quest for hegemonic equality or supremacy that results in their destruction at the hands of their partners, men who cannot and will not tolerate any significant transgression against the codes of the patriarchy. Interestingly, these four women are portrayed by Barbara Steele (Elizabeth) and Hazel Court (the others), actresses already associated with horror films whose status as iconic “scream queens” would be solidified by their contributions to the Poe franchise. As a result, Steele and Court are almost as emblematic of the series as is Vincent Price; their personas are

It is interesting to note that children are almost unheard of in the AIP series, even though most of the protagonists have apparently been married to their wives for several years. Of the sixteen characters portrayed by Vincent Price over the course of the series (including *Twice-Told Tales*), only four—Locke, Rappuccini, Erasmus Craven, and Lord Edward Whitman—are definitely established as being fathers. This is a strange statistic given that that only four other characters—Roderick Usher, Fortunato, Prospero, and Matthew Hopkins—are unmarried, although all are clearly sexually active except for Roderick (who may or may not have engaged in incestuous behavior with Madeline). Yet it is a tendency reiterated throughout the horror films of Vincent Price that his characters remain childless; outside of the Poe series, Price's protagonists father children only in *The Last Man on Earth* (in which the female child has died, as revealed in flashback) and in *Theatre of Blood*, in which the character's daughter (Diana Rigg) is his enthusiastic assistant in mayhem.

Why there are no more children present is never definitely stated, but the emphasis on alternative sexuality, such as sadomasochism, in several films posits scenarios in which the characters do not practice conventional sexual intercourse. In some cases, such as in *The Pit and the Pendulum* and *The Raven*, the wives in question are held up as romantic ideals, women so pure (at first glance) that they apparently cannot be "sullied" by coitus. In one instance, "The Case of M. Valdemar" episode of *Tales of Terror*, age and illness may explain the inability of a Price character to perform sexually. Furthermore, it is odd that when Price's characters do have children, the offspring are almost always female—both in the Poe series and in Price's other horror movies. This

tendency further underscores the emphasis on women as objects of veneration—when wives do get pregnant, they can best be honored by bringing females in their image into the world. The lack of male children can be construed in several ways; on one hand, there is a suggestion of incest, or at least a degree of unhealthy symbiosis between Price's characters and their daughters; on the other hand, the lack of sons foreshadows the inevitable end of the family lines the Price characters represent. In yet another context, the absence of children suggests the queer nature of Price's characters either in the specifically sexual sense or in the broader sense of being “unsuccessful” heterosexual males.

If they die without a male heir, Price's characters will preside over the extinction of the family itself. Whatever wealth and prestige that remains will ultimately be subsumed by another family if daughters survive and marry; if the daughters do not reproduce, the family name dies anyway. In *House of Usher*, Roderick's greatest fear is that his line will continue—tellingly, under another name. In *Cry of the Banshee*, Price does have male children—two sons—yet they and their sister are portrayed as violent, wicked, incestuous people with little regard for their wealth or responsibilities. *Cry of the Banshee* is the only horror film—in the series or without—that depicts Vincent Price's character having sons—and they are among the most despicable characters portrayed in any of the actor's projects. The lack of descendants, especially males, in the series symbolizes the decay of the aristocratic and patriarchal social order that the Price characters embody. The decay of the patriarchy in the series ultimately mirrors the social upheaval associated with sex and gender roles during the era in which the films were

characters embody. The decay of the patriarchy in the series ultimately mirrors the social upheaval associated with sex and gender roles during the era in which the films were produced, in effect becoming pop culture commentaries on the transformations taking place within society at large.

Mark Neimeyer praises the efforts of Roger Corman and Vincent Price as “one of the high points in the commodification of Poe,” although he undercuts his praise by attributing their popularity to “a semi-cult status that allows viewers to appreciate, and indeed revel in, the cheap special effects, campy dialogue, and kitsch atmosphere” (223). Crediting the survival of the Poe series to an enduring interest in “camp” and “kitsch” fails to take into consideration the millions of fans who have embraced the films out of a legitimate interest in horror, Poe, or Price himself. While undoubtedly some viewers approach the Poe films intending to laugh at them, the retrospectives of Corman’s work and the many books about Price reveal a widespread affection and respect for the series essentially free of irony on the part of critics and fans alike.

Perhaps it is the presence of Vincent Price that makes associations with “camp” and “kitsch” so easy to make. While the actor does have a reputation for kidding the material in many of his acting assignments, his contributions to the AIP series demonstrate that the actor took them seriously, at least the first and best developed entries, such as *House of Usher*, *Tomb of Ligeia*, and *The Conqueror Worm*. In most cases, Price comes across as “campy” when he is performing a comic role, such as in the obviously farcical “Black Cat” episode or *The Raven*. Among the straight horror films, Price is unquestionably over the top and suggests an embrace of blurred or unstable

sexuality in the early scenes of *Pit and the Pendulum*. However, once the simpering, confused Nicholas Medina is fully possessed by the spirit of his murderous father, Price's characterization is totally serious and aggressively heterosexual. Granted, the irony and malice inherent in some of Price's line readings throughout the series might inspire a grim chuckle among audiences, but such a reaction could well reflect viewers' relief that Price's depredations are not directly at them.

Ultimately the AIP series endures as a group of generally entertaining and thematically faithful adaptations of Poe. The movies have promoted interest in and awareness of Poe's place, not just as a figure in horror literature, but among the most influential figures in American literature and popular culture. Although intended as commercial products intended to make a profit from the amusement of a largely youthful and presumably uncritical audience, the films are rich with symbols and subtle allusions to the volatile issues associated with the social and sexual revolution of the 1960s. In the final analysis, however, the series' initial success and source of enduring interest can most obviously be attributed to the charismatic, energetic, and (more often than not) controlled performances of Vincent Price. Perhaps Roger Corman sums up the actor's importance best: "The keynote of his art lies, I believe, in his uncanny ability to embody and project the effects of mental aberration. He is rightly noted for his speaking voice and suave, polished presence through which he can convey eerie graduations of a sinister motivating force" (qtd. in Wiater 136).

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