

## Caroline and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter"

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The print media fully documented and commented on the trial of Queen Caroline for adultery in 1820, and they documented and discussed Queen Caroline after the trial through her death in 1821 and beyond. Perhaps the most famous of all literary works based in part on the life of Caroline was the third modern detective story, Edgar Allan Poe's classic 1844 "The Purloined Letter."

The first modern detective story, Poe's 1841 "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," is based in part on Edward Coleman's 1838 murder of his wife Ann, who may have been unfaithful to him. A woman of uncertain reputation was also, in part, the basis of the second modern detective story, Poe's "The Mystery of Marie Roget." Mary Cecilia Rogers was the compromised cigar girl whose dead body was found in the Hudson River in 1841. At first thought to have been murdered, Rogers was later reported to have died during a botched abortion. Poe's narrator was not able to protect the characters inspired by these models—either Mademoiselle L'Espanaye and her mother or Marie Rogêt. Yet he would have wanted to, for Marie Louise Shew Houghton wrote of Poe that "it was the regret of his life, that he had not vindicated his mother to the world, as pure, as angelic and altogether lovely, as any woman could be on earth."<sup>1</sup> His mother, Elizabeth Poe, a highly accomplished actress who had died when Edgar was not yet three, had been accused of having given birth to her third child, Poe's sister Rosalie, a year after her husband David Poe Jr. had left her. Indeed, Poe's foster father, John Allan, had written

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<sup>1</sup> Marie Louise Shew Houghton to John H. Ingram, 16 May 1875, in John Carl Miller, *Building Poe Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 140. For the full argument developed in short here, see Richard Kopley, *Edgar Allan Poe and the Dupin Mysteries* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

to Poe's brother Henry about Rosalie in 1824, "At least She is half your Sister & God forbid my dear Henry that We should visit upon the living the Errors & frailties of the dead."<sup>2</sup> Poe could never successfully defend his mother in fact—but he could do so in fiction through his use of Caroline in "The Purloined Letter."

The key intertext is *Death-Bed Confessions of the Late Countess of Guernsey, to Lady Anne H\*\*\*\*\**.<sup>3</sup> According to that work, "[a]n interested friend of the P[rince]ss" stole, "from the secretary's desk," Princess Caroline's letter to her husband George, the Prince Regent. (This took place in 1813, when George III was still alive; since he was insane, his son was made Prince Regent.) The "friend" provided the letter surreptitiously to the newspapers for publication to embarrass Caroline and anger her husband. Showing the newspaper to his "patron," who was antagonistic to the princess, he won a promotion. Then he showed the newspaper to the Prince Regent, prompting George's renewed hostility to his wife. Finally, the culprit "met that day his *confreres* at -----, and, after dinner, amused them with an account of the purloined letter."<sup>4</sup>

Poe, while in London and Liverpool as a boy, would have heard of Caroline, and later must have read *Death-Bed Confessions*. He then appropriated the tale of "the purloined letter" for his own purposes, probably in 1844.

In Poe's tale, the Minister D----- has stolen from an "illustrious personage" in "the royal apartments"—the Queen—a compromising letter to her, presumably from her lover.

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<sup>2</sup> Dwight Thomas and David K. Jackson, *The Poe Log: A Documentary Life of Edgar Allan Poe 1809-1849* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> *Death-Bed Confessions of the Late Countess of Guernsey, to Lady Anne H\*\*\*\*\** (London: John Fairburn, [1821]).

<sup>4</sup> I rely on the American edition of *Death-Bed Confessions* (Philadelphia: J. E. Moore, 1822?). See pp. 72-74. "Lady Anne H\*\*\*\*\*" was Lady Anne Hamilton. The author of the book may have been Hamilton or Mrs. Olivia Serres or perhaps both of them. The work has also been attributed to William Henry Ireland.

Not wanting “the other exalted personage”—the King—to notice the document, she could not interfere with its theft. However, whereas Caroline’s supposed “friend” gained power through his purloining, Minister D----- does not, for Poe’s detective, C. Auguste Dupin, recovers from the minister’s apartment the hidden-in-plain-sight letter (in the card-rack), and thereby saves the otherwise-compromised woman’s reputation.

Dupin, who represents Poe, was able to protect the Caroline figure, a woman of uncertain reputation, who is analogous to Poe’s mother. Like Dupin, Poe was “a partisan of the lady concerned.” As in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” so in “The Purloined Letter,” Poe was able to triumph over his cruel foster father.

Queen Caroline was “acquitted” in her 1820 trial,<sup>5</sup> and Poe similarly had Dupin prevent the Minister D----- from proving his Caroline figure guilty. Of course, Queen Caroline died in 1821, but she lives <sup>6</sup>on, sympathetically, as a critical inspiration for Poe’s extraordinary tale “The Purloined Letter.”

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<sup>5</sup> I rely on Flora Fraser’s *The Unruly Queen: The Life of Queen Caroline* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 443.