A Writer Who Turned Down France: "The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether" and Transatlantic Discourse on the French Revolution
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Synopsis: This paper focuses primarily on Edgar Allan Poe's “The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether” (1845), aiming to reconsider his relationship with France. Poe has been loved more earnestly in France than in America. On the other hand, he is said to express racial anxiety over slavery, an obviously American theme, in “Tarr and Fether,” a story set in France. Due to the lack of understanding of the cultural environment, critics regard the combination as a flaw. Nevertheless, many discourses on the French Revolution existed on both sides of the Atlantic. Magazines from the Antebellum South, including the one where Poe worked as an editor, carried articles in which racial fear is rendered through abhorrence of the French Revolution. This paper reveals how “Tarr and Fether” is influenced by transatlantic discourse and that Poe himself shared Southern enmity toward France.

Introduction

The relationship between France and Edgar Allan Poe is one of the most fruitful and frequently discussed topics in Poe studies. If not for a number of French critics and literati who were fascinated with Poe, from Charles-Pierre Baudelaire through to Paul Valéry and Stéphane Mallarmé, the American writer would not have achieved the fame he now enjoys in France and throughout the world. Patrick F. Quinn explores this French admiration for Poe in The French Face of Edgar Allan Poe (1957). Furthermore, the work of more recent post-structuralist critics, such as Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida, has stimulated new critical interpretations, including the book-length
collection *The Purloined Poe* (1988), which provides both deconstructionist and psychoanalytical readings of Poe’s “The Purloined Letter” (1844).

Poe’s reception by the French, however, reveals very little about the way he understood and represented France in his writing. Andrea Goulet’s chapter on Poe and France in *Edgar Allan Poe in Context* (2013) reveals that some contemporary critics still overlook this point. Goulet spends much of her brief chapter discussing how Poe was received by French writers. According to Goulet, Poe displayed “a predilection for Gallic culture” that demonstrates he was a “Francophile” who “would have been gratified by the enormous success his work found in France” (41). The French Poe was born from one of the happiest receptions writers could wish to acquire in foreign countries. Goulet, however, relates virtually nothing about the France that Poe describes and evokes in his writing.

Other trends in Poe studies even reject the image of Poe as a “Francophile,” because these critics have found that Poe’s works set in France reflect his anxieties over racial tension. For example, “The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether” (1845), set in a lunatic asylum in southern France, has often been regarded as a representation of the South’s fear of a slave insurrection (Levine and Levine “Comic” 142).

If southern France merely represents the American South, the work’s French setting does not fit well, or is too easily dismissed. Bernard A. Drabeck writes that although “several particulars in ‘Tarr and Fether’ connect it immediately with current arguments raging over Abolition,” the issue “is disguised by setting the tale in France” (178). To critics like Drabeck, “France” is merely a convenient way to camouflage the inflammatory problem of slavery.

Other critics have examined the historical implications of setting works in France. Benjamin Reiss explores the influence of the French Revolution on “Tarr and Fether” (143–68). John T. Irwin and John
Carlos Rowe also analyze the importance of the French political upheaval in the Dupin tales (Irwin 340–56, Rowe 122–26). Although these insights are valuable, they do not sufficiently inquire into the cultural milieu of the Revolution that interested Poe. Consequently, their arguments fail to provide enough historical context in which Poe’s writing should be interpreted.

Indeed, there were texts on the French Revolution available in antebellum America, some of which Poe must have read. For example, the April 1836 issue of *Southern Literary Messenger* (*SLM*) carries an anonymous play entitled “The Death of Robespierre,” which dramatizes the fall of Maximilien Robespierre, the leader of the infamous Jacobin Reign of Terror. It is impossible that Poe, who worked as an editor at *SLM* in 1836, did not know about this article.

This paper is principally concerned with “Tarr and Fether” and aims to historicize Poe’s France by focusing on the interrelation between the French Revolution in Poe’s works and transatlantic discourse on the revolution. I argue that this relation compels reconsideration of the affection that Poe supposedly reciprocated toward the French, who later would so admire him.

1. The State, the French Revolution, and Insanity

“Tarr and Fether” is replete with political terms and a rhetoric that identifies the asylum with a state. Having heard of the hospital’s “soothing system,” which allows patients to do whatever they want as much as possible, the narrator of the story visits the asylum. He expresses his admiration for the soothing system to Maillard, the hospital’s superintendent, only to find that it is no longer in operation. The narrator, however, is completely unaware of the ironic situation in which he finds himself. Maillard, who was originally in charge of the asylum, became insane and, as an inmate, instigated other patients to riot and run the asylum themselves. Maillard, who now reigns over the
asylum as if it were a state, is in fact a revolutionary, and the narrator is his unwitting foil. While explaining to the narrator the demise of the soothing system and the revolt in the hospital in political terms, but without telling the truth, Maillard says, “it all came to pass by means of a stupid fellow—a lunatic—who, by some means, had taken it into his head that he had invented a better system of government than any ever heard of before—of lunatic government” (TS 2:1018). Maillard clearly suggests that his own motivation as a lunatic was to cause political change in the pursuit of a better way to “govern” people.

The narrator also uses political terminology in his conversations with Maillard. Referring to the soothing system, the narrator says, “[t]he excellent administration of your affairs here is well understood in Paris” (TS 2:1018). Clearly, the political connotations of these words indicate the hospital is a metaphor for the state. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that the narrator, who starts to feel uneasy listening to Maillard, replies to him, “I presume a counter revolution was soon effected” (2:1019). Maillard’s rebellion is not just a minor assault on a single institution, but a figurative national “revolution” that gives birth to the reign of maniacs.

Since “Tarr and Fether” is a story about a revolution, the name of its protagonist “Maillard” is superbly apt. As Thomas Ollive Mabbott points out, it is the namesake of Stanislas-Marie Maillard, a leader of the rebels who captured the Bastille (TS 2:1022). The Bastille was stormed in Paris on July 14, 1789, and the incident is regarded as the beginning of the French Revolution. Although the Bastille, originally constructed as a fort at the end of the fourteenth century, was due for demolition at the time of the French Revolution, the prison still retained such symbolic power that “although . . . the crowd of a thousand that gathered before its front court was after gunpowder rather than demolition, it was, without any question, also mobilized by the immense force of the Bastille’s evil mystique” (Schama 399). Even after its eventual disappearance, the Bastille “gave a shape and an
image to all the vices against which the Revolution defined itself” and “incorporated all those rejoicing at its capture as members of the new community of the Nation” (408). More than any other factor, the Bastille continued to ignite the people’s rage against despotism and fueled the revolution. It was rumored, or perhaps claimed by himself, that Stanislas-Marie Maillard received a written capitulation from a prison official at the time of the Bastille’s capture (461). In borrowing Maillard’s name, Poe might have had in mind this picture of Maillard as both a captor and liberator in the French Revolution.

In “Tarr and Fether,” Poe’s Maillard is also both the captor of a prison and a liberator of captives. Despite the soothing system, which allows patients the freedom to do whatever they want without causing a disturbance, the institution still restricts their freedom. Just as his namesake captured the Bastille, Poe’s Maillard restores the unrestricted freedom of the asylum’s patients or prisoners within the confines of the hospital.

The stories of the two Maillards have other features in common. In “Tarr and Fether,” two-thirds of the guests who attend a dinner with the narrator are women (TS 2:1007). The gender balance recalls what came to be known as “the Women’s March on Versailles,” when on April 5, 1789, Maillard led a march, mainly comprised of women, that successfully forced Louis XVI to return with them to Paris. In his The French Revolution (1837), Thomas Carlyle describes the female mob hailing Maillard as “Bastille-hero” (254). Correspondingly, the predominately female guests at the dinner in “Tarr and Fether” invoke the historical Maillard’s women. Furthermore, there is a subtle, but telling, literary allusion in Carlyle’s passage. He calls the females in the march on Versailles “Menads,” female followers of Bacchus (254). The name is derived from the Greek for “mad.” Both the historical and fictional Maillards lead mad women in their respective revolutions.

In addition to Carlyle’s depiction of French revolutionary women as insane, an obvious theme of “Tarr and Fether,” the conservative English
politician, Edmund Burke also regards the revolution as a liberated lunatic. In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), Burke asks his readers the following rhetorical question:

> Is it because liberty in the abstract may be classed amongst the blessings of mankind, that I am seriously to felicitate a madman, who has escaped from the protecting restraint and wholesome darkness of his cell, on his restoration to the enjoyment of light and liberty? (8)

This analogy of the French Revolution as the liberation of “a madman” corresponds perfectly with the story of “Tarr and Fether,” in which a madman facilitates a revolution. As Benjamin Reiss observes, “[f]or Burke, the madman was a figure for all those irrational latent forces in society that need constantly to be held in check by authority; revolution both emanates from those forces and causes them to proliferate” (143). The fictional Maillard also explains the asylum cells prevent the spread of the patient’s “disorder” (*TS* 2:1006). Just as Burke feared, when the cell fails to prevent “the malady of some individual” from infecting others, the escaping maniacs reverse an existing order (2:1006).

The border between sanity and insanity itself is ambiguous in “Tarr and Fether.” Maillard explains how hard it is to distinguish these mental states as follows:

> A lunatic may be “soothed,” as it is called, for a time, but, in the end, he is very apt to become obstreperous. His cunning, too, is proverbial, and great. If he has a project in view, he conceals his design with a marvelous wisdom; and the dexterity with which he counterfeits sanity, presents, to the metaphysician, one of the most singular problems in the study of mind. When a mad man appears thoroughly sane, indeed, it is high time to put him in straight jacket. (*TS* 2:1018)
According to Maillard, at the very moment a man seems most sane, it is highly probable that his insanity is extreme. Provided one is approaching the other when they are supposed to be moving away, there is no way to discern them clearly. As the lunatic superintendent, Maillard himself illustrates this point because “the marvelous wisdom” of his insanity completely deceives the narrator.

Portrayals of the French Revolution also vacillate between sanity and insanity. Despite being compared to the actions of madmen by Burke, the revolution, above all, was supposed to have originated in reason. As the phrase “light and liberty” from Burke’s quote suggests, the French Revolution was born in the age of the Enlightenment. Takeo Kuwabara argues that the root of the Enlightenment is critical thought based on an unshakable belief in human reason (2); the French Revolution was a product of a belief in reason. The paradox, that a revolution that originates in reason becomes insane, is consistent with Maillard’s claim. It is little wonder that a revolution that vacillates between reason and unreason results in a fiction that blurs the distinction between sanity and insanity.

2. Anxiety over the Mob in the French Revolution in Antebellum America

Poe’s interest in the French Revolution can be traced through his citations of literary works. His miscellany “Pinakidia” appeared in the August 1836 issue of SLM and, in Pinakidia number 145, he reproduces a Latin quatrain he claims was inscribed on “the gates of the market to be erected on the site of the famous Jacobin Club at Paris.” The first two lines of the poem reads “Impia tortorum longas hic turba furores / Sanguinis innocui, non satiata, aluit [Here the wicked mob, unappeased, long cherished a hatred of innocent blood]” (CW 2:20; Pollin 2:20). As Kevin J. Hayes has discovered, an editor appended the poem to Mooriana (1803), the Scottish physician John Moore’s collection
of selected writings (88). In his essay “The Jacobin Club,” Moore comments on the complicity between the mob and the Jacobins: “let us further suppose that a mob is always ready, at the command of the leading members [of the Jacobins], to insult those of either house of parliament, of whose public conduct they disapprove” (2:168). Since Poe quotes the poem, it is likely that he had read Moore and was familiar with this British sentiment toward the Jacobins and their complicity with mob.

Above all else, antebellum America was averse to mob rule and their view that the French Revolution was ruled by a violent mob was irrevocably shaped by the September Massacre of 1792. Fueled by speculation about foreign intervention and domestic counter-revolutionaries, Parisians attacked prisons and slaughtered inmates accused of conspiracy. As Rachel Hope Cleves says, “by fall 1792, the word mob was becoming shorthand for Jacobin violence” (8; italics in original). Stanislas-Marie Maillard played an important role in the massacre. He organized a court at the Abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, where priests were summarily executed.

Maillard's participation in the September Massacre is well documented in antebellum American writing that continues to display a strong aversion to the violence of mob violence. An anonymous review of three books about the French Revolution that appeared in the January 1844 issue of the Southern Quarterly Review describes the Women’s March on Versailles and Maillard as follows: “Never was such a mob led by man, as Maillard led out from Paris to Versailles on the 5th October, 1789. . . . How this Amazonian mob entered the hall of the national assembly” (“French Revolution” 36). Instead of citizens fighting for liberty and equality, the marching women are depicted as “an Amazonian mob.” Maillard appears again in the reviewer’s description of the September Massacre:

Maillard (who formerly headed the women on 5th Oct.) was present
with his rabble; they fell immediately on the priests, and murdered them one after another until the whole were dispatched, with the solitary exception of the Abbe Sicard, who was saved almost by a miracle. (57)

It seems as if the violence that erupted in the September Massacre was already latent in the Women’s March on Versailles. Maillard, the leader of “the Amazonian mob,” now sets “his rabble” to the slaughtering of priests.

Moreover, Poe often associates mobs with madness, as in “a tumultuous mob of idiots and madmen” in “Four Beasts in One” (1833) (TS 1:125). That even one lunatic can instigate a mob-like revolution is implied by a scene of mock violence in “The Purloined Letter.” A “loud report, as if of a pistol . . . a series of fearful screams, and the shouting of a mob” momentarily distracts Minster D—’s attention, which allows Dupin to remove a letter D— had stolen and replace it with a forgery (2:992). Dupin had paid a man to pretend to be “a lunatic” and fire a blank from a musket, in order to cause an uproar on the street below (2:992). John Carlos Rowe regards “[t]he ‘disturbance in the street’” as “a mock-enactment of a ‘lunatic’ or anarchic act of revolution” (124). Mobs in Poe’s stories rise in revolutions, but they are “idiots and madmen.”

3. The French Revolution, the Haitian Revolution, and Black Slavery

The French Revolution not only aroused anxiety over mobs, but also fueled fears of slave revolt, a view apparently shared by Poe. A pro-slavery review titled “Slavery,” which is called the Paulding-Drayton review by critics, appeared in the April 1836 issue of SLM, and there is some controversy as to whether Poe is the author. The review criticizes the French Revolution as follows:
In the history of the French Revolution, we find a sort of symptomatic phenomenon, the memory of which was soon lost in the fearful exacerbation of the disease. But it should be remembered now, that in that war against property, the first object of attack was property in slaves. . . . The recent events in the West Indies, and the parallel movement here, give an awful importance to these thoughts in our minds. (337)

Although this criticism inserted into an apologia for American slavery appears rather abrupt at first, the reference to “[t]he recent events in the West Indies” provides a clue to the reason.

It is the Haitian Revolution of 1791 that provides the connection between slavery, the French Revolution, and the West Indies. Formerly known as St. Domingue, Haiti was a French colony with institutionalized slavery. The French revolutionary government abolished slavery on February 4, 1794, with the result that Haiti became an independent state; and more importantly, abolition resulted in the only successful revolution accomplished by African slaves.

This revolution also had implications for American foreign policy and the country’s domestic concerns. The then President, Thomas Jefferson, refused to recognize Haiti. The United States continued to deny recognition until 1862, principally because slavery was still practiced in America and Haiti symbolized the emancipation of slaves. As Tadao Hama observes, Haiti’s recognition would have to wait for abolitionism to spread across the United States (257).

It is no surprise that Southern slave owners were indignant toward France and the French Revolution, because the country officially abolished slavery and gave lawful freedom to the slaves who attempted an insurrection. Somewhat ironically, the Southerners directed their anger at the French through Toussaint Louverture, an emancipated slave who played a significant role in the Haitian Revolution. They “admired Toussaint’s ability to control the revolution, restore law and
order in the war-torn colony, and forcibly return the former slaves to the plantations to work as a free labor force” (Hunt 86). Naturally, the motivation of the Southerners was purely economic rather than sympathetic toward the slaves. When Louverture died in France in 1803, after being held captive by the French army, his fate became a rallying cry for those American Federalists who wished to discredit the French. Even Southern slave owners were more anti-French than anti-black: the French threat to their expansionist plans in the Mississippi Valley was immediate (87).

Louverture’s presence in anti-French writings continued in the 1850s. As D. J. McCord writes in the May 1855 issue of De Bow’s Review, Toussaint Louverture “was less tricky and faithless than his French friends, and was inferior in deceit to the generals of the great Napoleon” (597). Alfred N. Hunt elaborates on this passage as follows: “There was a hint in this statement . . . that it was unbelievable that the French dared to introduce black freedom and equality into the Caribbean. Slavery apologists had no use for the French or their radical ideology” (90). For Southerners, the French radicals were less tolerable than a former slave leader they could use to their advantage. The passage about antebellum animosity toward the French, quoted from the Paulding-Drayton review above, should be understood in its historical context.

Another SLM article further clarifies how the apology for slavery, the French Revolution, and the Haitian Revolution were connected in ways that are not immediately obvious. “Alison’s History of Europe,” an anonymous review of a book by the Scottish historian Archibald Alison, appeared in the March 1843 issue of SLM. Most of this review is composed of quotations from the book, but the selections quoted reveal the reviewer’s ideological attitude. The first quotation emphasizes “[t]he universality of slavery in the early ages of mankind” (“Alison’s” 138). The next paragraph reads, “[h]ow miserable soever the condition of slaves may be in those unruly times, they are incomparably better off
than they would have, if they had incurred the destitution of freedom” (138). Although this passage is a quotation from a Scottish historian, it features the clichéd propaganda of pro-slavery apologists that claims slaves voluntarily stood by their masters and that slaves in the service of their masters must be happier than they would be if they were free, but without protection.

The reviewer also cites passages about “the servile insurrection of St. Domingo” to demonstrate the results of French radical ideology (“Slavery” 138). Having received “the leveling principles of the Constituent Assembly . . . crowds of slaves traversed the country with the heads of the white children affixed on their pikes” (138). Even in the midst of this brutality, “some faithful slaves . . . fed in caves their masters or their children, whom they had rescued from destruction” (138). By including these scenes of barbarism and the loyalty of some faithful slaves, the writer attempts to illustrate how destructive the world would be if order was overturned by “the leveling principles” of French radicals and exaggerates the affectionate bond between some slaves and their masters.

The author of the Paulding-Drayton review also asserts that there exists a “loyal devotion on the part of the slave” and “the master’s reciprocal feeling of parental attachment to his humble dependent” (“Slavery” 338). As proof, the author narrates a melodramatic story of a female slave who would not leave her mistress’s deathbed (338–39). There is no doubt that these anonymous reviews published in *SLM* share an ideology in trying to establish an affectionate relationship between masters and slaves.

Southern anti-French sentiment, at a time of aggressive anti-slavery activism, went so deep that liberated French people were thought of as emancipated slaves. “The Death of Robespierre,” the anonymous play referred to in the beginning of my paper, was published in the same issue of *SLM* that carried the Paulding-Drayton review. The eponymous French tyrant calls his followers “my slaves” and
demeans the people as “bigot slaves” (“Robespierre” 306). Furthermore, in a speech reproaching Robespierre on the day of the Thermidorian Reaction, the character Tallien declares that “Tallien disdains to live/The slave of Robespierre” (307). At the conclusion of the play, Robespierre again calls the abusive crowd “unfetter’d slaves” from the scaffold (309).

If the play ended with the death of Robespierre, then it would fall into the genre of anti-slavery literature, but Robespierre’s final words to the crowd foreshadow a more ominous outcome. Robespierre prophesizes that his death will never bring the people any ease because they are “bondmen of [their] own vile passions,” which in turn allow a tyrant like him to thrive (“Robespierre” 309). The play’s conclusion implies that when people “claim a birthright to be free,” they are driven by their barbaric instincts, which helped bring Robespierre to power (309). Thus, they will always have to fear the day when their desire for freedom from servitude will give birth to another Robespierre and his Reign of Terror. Here, the author tries to expose the supposed interdependency of oppressed people and their oppressors in the French Revolution.

4. Two Revolutions

So far, the argument has focused on the transatlantic discourse of the French Revolution. It is clear that Poe was not an anomaly in writing a story that renders Southern racial anxiety in France. However, he includes a detail that invokes another revolution. At the climax, the intoxicated orchestra plays the tune “Yankee Doodle” just before the hospital staff, who were imprisoned in the asylum’s underground cells, escape and attack Maillard, the other inmates, and the narrator (TS 2:1020). Because this folk tune was often sung during the American Revolution, J. Gerald Kennedy argues that this rendition underscores a “scandalous association of the lunatic revolt with the American Revolution” (16). Lunatic revolutions in this story therefore allude not
only to the French Revolution, but also to the American Revolution.

The references to the French and American revolutions in the story are unsurprising considering that, historically, they were closely related during the last two decades of the eighteenth century. Compelled by its enmity against England and pursuing commercial interests, France, under the reign of Louis XVI, supported American independence. The French involvement in the War of Independence went so deep that, as William Doyle observes, “[w]hen British forces surrendered at Yorktown in 1781, the victory was more French than American” (20).

America, in turn, afforded a splendid example for the later revolutionists. As Cleves points out:

[Marquis de] Lafayette’s leadership in French revolutionary politics from 1787 until 1792 and [Thomas] Paine’s service in the National Convention in 1792, seemed to show that American ideas had been transported to Europe by the heroes of 1776 and were now inspiring millions to demand their freedom. America was fulfilling its visionary role as a city on a hill. (79)

Nonetheless, positive comparisons ended when the later revolution took a more violent turn. The reviewer of Alison’s *History of Europe*, referring to “the effects which the American Revolution had upon the public mind, and the cause of civil liberty in France,” includes Louis XVI’s France as part of the Old World to claim that “[t]he success of the Americans shook the foundations of despotism in the Old World, and the throne of Louis tottered from his efforts to overthrow that of England” (139). Even considering that Alison, a Scottish historian, wrote the *History of Europe*, the reviewer provides no sympathy for the motives of Louis XVI.

In May 1793, almost fifty years before this review appeared, Alexander Hamilton, an American Federalist politician, wrote a letter that complained of “the tendency of public demonstrations of
attachment to the cause of France” (44). In the same letter, he refutes any similarity between the French and American Revolutions:

The cause of France is compared with that of America during its late revolution. Would to Heaven that the comparison were just. . . . I am glad to believe there is no real resemblance between what was the cause of America and what is the cause of France—that the difference is no less great than that between liberty and licentiousness. (45)

The French Revolution, which lacked “the same humanity, the same decorum, the same gravity, the same order, the same dignity, the same solemnity, that distinguished the cause of the American Revolution,” was an embodied chaos ruled by mob violence (45). To the conservative American, the substantial differences between the two revolutions were obvious.

In spite of Hamilton’s attempt to distinguish the two revolutions, mob rule was not a political problem across the Atlantic, far removed from nineteenth century America. The first half of the nineteenth century saw the rise of mob power in American politics. Poe was writing in a period known as Jacksonian Democracy. This flowering of democratic politics was not what the Founding Fathers had envisioned. The presidency that the Founding Fathers planned was supposed to be aloof from political strife, and they could not predict “[t]he democratic development of the presidency” (McClelland 107). By the 1830s, the more widespread the voter’s franchise became, the more votes candidates had to attract in order to win an election. As J. S. McClelland observes, “[t]he crowd, some of whom had come five hundred miles to see General Jackson [at his inauguration], negated the physical and political distance the Founding Fathers had so carefully put between the president and the crowd” (108).

Poe despised mobs as a form of political power and the American
mobocracy, and some critics believe he wrote satires of Jacksonian Democracy. In contrast to Hamilton, he even accuses the American Revolution of ending in mobocracy. In “Some Words with a Mummy” (1845), published in the same year as “Tarr and Fether,” the narrator and his companions try to impress a mummified Count, who awakes from a long sleep, with “the great beauty and importance of democracy.” They fail to convince the mummy of the advantages of “living where there was suffrage ad libitum, and no king.” The mummy then recounts the outcome of a similar incident in ancient Egypt:

Thirteen Egyptian provinces determined all at once to be free, and to set a magnificent example to the rest of mankind. They assembled their wise men, and concocted the most ingenious constitution it is possible to conceive. For a while they managed remarkably well; only their habit of bragging was prodigious. The thing ended, however, in the consolidation of the thirteen states, with some fifteen or twenty others, in the most odious and insupportable despotism that was ever heard of upon the face of the Earth.

I [the narrator] asked what was the name of the usurping tyrant. As well as the Count could recollect, it was Mob. (TS 2:1193 –94)

Here, the phrases “Thirteen Egyptian provinces” and “the most ingenious constitution,” which are an allusion to the thirteen American states that declared their independence from Britain, clearly suggest this story is an allegory about the American Revolution. Unlike Hamilton, Poe recognizes nothing orderly about it. Instead, an ambition “to be free” results in mobocracy.

Some references in “Tarr and Fether” deserve special attention, since they also allude to mobocracy. At the end of the story, the narrator explains what happened before he visited the hospital.
Maillard “generously allowed them [the keepers] . . . the tar and feathers (which constituted his ‘system’)” (TS 2:1021). The parenthesized “system” denotes “treatment” or “theory,” but, in context, also signifies the “structure” or “organization” of a state, since Maillard refers to his delusion as “a better system of government” and “a lunatic government.” Furthermore, the word “constitute” is a pun on “constitution,” on which a state is founded. If “tar and feathers,” or lynching, works as a “constitution,” it is a state ruled by mob violence.

The image of tar and feathers has particular significance in this story. Despite their personification in the story’s title, “The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether,” the characters Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether do not actually appear in the narrative’s space-time. This suggests they may be part of Maillard’s delusion and Poe uses it to create a satire on the perception of authority. Personifying tar and feathers as a doctor and a professor raises and institutionalizes the status of mob rule. Maillard emphasizes this authority: “You [the narrator] did not intend to say, eh? that you had never heard either of the learned Doctor Tarr, or of the celebrated Professor Fether?” (TS 2:1017). In the response to Maillard’s astonishment, the narrator is forced to admit his “ignorance” and feels “humbled to the dust” (2:1017). As allegorical figures, Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether allow Poe to show how people obey authority created by mob violence even if it is nothing but an illusion.

Furthermore, even if its authoritative power is fake, what is distinctive about mob violence in this story is its power to transform its victims. When the keepers, “first well tarred, then carefully feathered,” attack the narrator, he thinks they are “Chimpanzees, Ourang-Outangs, or big black baboons of the Cape of Good Hope” (TS 2:1021). Many critics have interpreted this image of apes as a representation of black slaves. Yet, somewhat ironically, the keepers are expected to maintain order in the institution. In applying this structure to slavery, the keepers are supposed to correspond to slave owners, not slaves. In fact,
some critics believe that the mad inmates represent slaves and that their taking over the hospital is a slave uprising. The mob violence, which constitutes Maillard’s system, ironically transforms slave owners into slaves and in turn ignites another slave rebellion.

Besides the reversal of masters and slaves, “Tarr and Fether” displays other instances where binary oppositions are confused or reversed. Harmonious sounds of music in the hospital represent the seemingly “sound” reason of the lunatics who pretend they are sane. On the other hand, the music is accompanied by loud noises from the prisoners who “get up a howl in concert” in the underground cell (TS 2: 1015). The noise, in contrast to the harmonious music, corresponds to insanity, but it is the imprisoned keepers, not the real lunatics, who make these sounds.

In this confusion of binary oppositions, Maillard, who personifies the crossing of the border between sanity and insanity, slave and owner, deliberately emphasizes these reversals: “[t]he keepers and kept were soon made to exchange places” (TS 2:1019). Maillard’s words suggest that what is important in a system is your place, but this position is also fluid. Even if you are in the position of the keeper or the owner in one moment, you might be the kept or the slave in another. Although “Tarr and Fether” underlines the importance of position in a system, its fixture is helplessly unstable.

Equally important is that racial difference, the basis of American slavery, itself was not a stable concept in nineteenth century America. Teresa A. Goddu, who emphasizes the ways in which the protagonists of Poe’s The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym (1838) constantly cross the color line, discusses monogenism, which claims the original sameness of men (84). This theory gained great popularity in 1830s and 40s America, but, as the tension over slavery rose, polygenism, which claims the essential difference of races, gained more ground. Against this background, Goddu argues that “Pym’s narrative of racial convertibility . . . more fully engages the earlier discourse of monogenism. The novel
[Pym] insists that identities are fluid . . . [and] claims that character can change according to environment” (84). In 1837, Poe had already written a story wherein racial boundaries are not absolute, but as fluid as those between sanity and insanity in “Tarr and Fether.”

The fear of racial uncertainty depicted in Pym is extended further by the problem of the “system” in “Tarr and Fether.” The story shows that a system will last as long as people believe in its authority, even when that authority is an illusion. If racial boundaries are not fixed, the difference between owners and slaves resides solely in the respective positions they occupy. The keepers depicted in the story, who lose their position of authority and change their complexion as result of mob violence, are telling it.

5. Conclusion

Antebellum America abhorred the mob violence of the French Revolution and expressed this in discourse about the revolution. It is, however, not clear whether the system of mob rule depicted in “Tarr and Fether” refers to the French or America Revolutions. Poe blurs the distinction between them and identifies the mob rule during the French Revolution with the mobocracy during the Jacksonian Democracy. The result is the vision of a state where even racial boundaries cannot determine one’s position in a social system and where an owner in one moment could fall into slavery through mob violence in an instant.

Therefore, the fact that Poe wrote stories set in France indicates not his love of the country, but the possibility that he might have shared with other Americans an enmity toward it over racial issues. Paradoxically, the American writer, who later would be loved more earnestly in France than in his home country, revealed his American face at the very moment he set his stories there.
Notes

1 This paper is based on the presentation given at the Sixth Annual Conference of the Edgar Allan Poe Society of Japan on September 14, 2013, at Rissho University, Tokyo, and Chapter 1 of the Ph.D Dissertation submitted to and accepted by Kwansei Gakuin University in 2014.

2 As for “The Purloined Letter,” J. Gerald Kennedy, referring to Rowe and Irwin, observes “no one has to my knowledge yet linked the tale directly to US history” (30).

3 Poe worked at SLM as an editor from the summer of 1835 to January 1837. The magazine continued to publish his works after he left.

4 For other sources of Maillard’s name, see Levine and Levine, The Short Fiction 619.

5 Rowe finds one more “simulated ‘revolution’” in “The Purloined Letter.” He writes, “[t]he ‘disturbance in the street’ . . . motivates the reasoned act of ‘counter revolution’: the apparent restoration of monarchy with the subtler effect of the instantiation of Dupin’s power as master of rhetoric” (124).

6 On the controversy over the authorship of this review, see Rowe 119–21.

7 Eve Dunbar thinks one of the “recent events in the West Indies” is “the 1831–1832 Baptist War in Jamaica” (42). Since the events are “recent,” Dunbar’s supposition is undeniable. Jamaica, however, was a British colony at that time and her supposition cannot explain the reference to the French Revolution in the preceding paragraph.

8 The reviewer confuses two colonies. St. Domingo is not exactly St. Domingue. Both were Western colonies on Hispaniola Island in the Caribbean, but St. Domingo, the present Dominican Republic, was ruled by Spain.

9 Cleves analyzes this letter and concludes that Hamilton “saw nothing incidental about the violence of the September Massacres; they were systematic efforts to destroy civil society” (79).

10 On mobs and American politics in the nineteenth century, see McClelland 83–109. On the disbelief in democracy the Founding Fathers harbored, see Smolinski and Rumiano 183–84.

11 For more thorough examination on Poe’s satires of Andrew Jackson, see Erkkila.

12 On orangutans as a metaphor for black slaves, see Tatsumi 199–201.

13 According to Stuart and Susan Levine, the inmates, not the keepers, possess some traits that slaves were typically supposed to have (Levine and Levine, “Comic” 142).
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Works Cited


