Illustrating the Uncertainty Within Recent Comics Adaptations of Edgar Allan Poe

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Perhaps no other American author has sparked the adaptive imagination of popular culture like Edgar Allan Poe. More than any other writer, he has served as the inspiration for everything from films to video games, from toy action figures to young adult paranormal romance fiction, from television cartoons to concept albums or CDs. Within the medium of comics, the examples are truly staggering with multifaceted adaptations that are faithful to the original texts, politicized and polemical, deconstructive or parodic, satiric as well as irreverent, and appropriative of the Poe persona. Indeed, M. Thomas Inge has argued that Poe has been adapted to the comics medium more than any other American writer, well over three-hundred times as of 2008 (Incredible Mr. Poe 14). If in studying comics, one were to limit oneself to those adapted from other media—a gargantuan and formidable task—then one would find the graphic devotion to Edgar Allan Poe to be an ever-expanding cottage industry.

The focus of this present study will concern these comics adaptations of Poe, specifically contemporary manifestations of his work and how the comics form is particularly suited to translate, and even transcend, the conventions in which Poe writes. Here I will follow up on a previous study of Poe adaptations where I investigated (at the time) recent examples of Poe’s work in comics form. There, I was especially interested in not only the diverse ways in which Poe’s writings had been represented visually, but how the tone of his fiction and poetry had been signified by the various comics artists (for example, uses
of romantic irony and the predominance of gothic ambiguity) and how the comics medium is particularly suited to adapt these issues. Since the publication of that essay there have been a significant number of additional Poe adaptations in comics form. In fact, the number of Poe adaptations in comics since 2008 has surpassed that of a previous comparable period, and discussed in the earlier study. For those with a palate for Poe-tinged graphic narrative, the most recent offerings are a veritable smorgasbord.

The examples discussed herein are all clear instances of comics texts, combinations of words and illustrations (although not necessarily a balance of the two) that reveal their narratives through sequential presentation. These are usually multi-paneled pages where the text is inextricably embedded in the graphics, either in speech balloons ("real time" speech action that is part of the diegesis) or extradiegetic "voice-overs," that is, commentary or exposition from a narrator outside of the story's action, usually placed in dialog boxes toward the top of a panel. As such, I am excluding from my analysis those works where the images are merely supplements to the original text, much as you would find in a work of literature decorated with the occasional illustration that carries little, if any, narrative weight. However, in my analysis I will not privilege those comics that are more straightforward or "faithful" to the original, either in form or spirit. Much of the richness to be found in graphic adaptations rests upon the variety of uses to which Poe has been put. Translating into comics form a "true" version of "The Masque of the Red Death" is neither more or less legitimate than using the story as a springboard into an entirely different, and perhaps even contradictory, narrative trajectory.

In this sense, it would be most useful to reference the writings of Linda Hutcheon as a point of departure. In her work on adaptation theory, Hutcheon presents what she calls a "reception continuum" model when defining those cultural productions that deliberately translate, revisit, or remediate a text. At one end of this critical scale are "those forms in which fidelity to the prior work is a theoretical ideal, even if a practical impossibility." At the other end are works that adapt much more loosely, either as "spin-offs"—texts that derive from or offer commentary on a prior work, whether or not that work reuses material from another medium—or "expansions," works that play off of a prior text as a point of departure, such as sequels and prequels, fanzines, and fan fiction (171).3 Regarding recent comics-based adaptations of Edgar Allan Poe, there are those that fall along the entire spectrum of Hutcheon’s model: comics that attempt a faithful translation, those that reinterpret the original narratives in light of more contemporary issues and contexts, graphic novels that use Poe’s writings as a springboard for completely
original tales, and comics that play off of the iconic status surrounding the nineteenth-century author.

Just as significant as adaptation's relationship with the original is the form of presentation. How the comics are packaged, and made available to the reader, can affect the way we interpret and appreciate the text. The way we read an anthology is different from the manner in which we take in a miniseries (perhaps later collected as a trade) or an original graphic novel. And adaptations written primarily as plot summaries—intended as graphic versions of Cliff Notes—pose different reading assumptions than do translations that are created to stand on their own. Yet, what all of these adaptations have in common is the effort to give graphic expression to the themes that best define Poe's writings: the longings and ambiguities that define the human heart, the dynamics that illustrate the uncertainties within. Over the past several years, these comics adaptations of Poe have taken one of four general forms: multiple stories adapted by various creators in an anthology, an individual tale adapted as a single text, multiple stories adapted by a single artist or creative team into one cohesive volume, and an original fictional narrative where the historical/cultural figure of Edgar Allan Poe serves as the central character.

Adapting the Figure of Edgar Allan Poe

Some of the more notable recent adaptations of Poe fall in this latter category, for instead of attempting to translate or remediate his original poems and short stories, they use the figure of Edgar Allan Poe as a basis for their own fictional narratives. While this type of appropriation may not be commonly read as an adaptation, it nonetheless functions as one, in that the comics incorporate into their stories references to Poe's literature, which in many ways are inextricable from the persona of Poe himself. When we read of ravens, black cats, pendulums, and haunted palaces, it is difficult not to visualize the actual author behind these creations, a mental image that for many readers has become synonymous with gothic horror. Indeed, several of the more “faithful” adaptations of Poe's stories include frame narrators and even protagonists who bear a striking similarity to popular images we can readily recognize, e.g., middle-aged men with a wide forehead, a parted sweep of hair, a cravat, a smallish mouth, and a moderately shaped moustache.4

More to the point are those comics that use the historical figure of Poe as a protagonist without any overt pretense of translating any of his tales. The most liberal use of Poe's persona, and most wildly fantastic, can be found in
Dwight L. MacPherson’s *The Surreal Adventures of Edgar Allan Poo* (2007, 2008). Appearing first as a webcomic and then eventually being collected into paperback volumes—two have been published so far—it is the story of a diminutive version of the author who is “expelled” by his larger father figure, Edgar Allan Poe. As the story opens, the writer is exiting an outhouse after having relieved himself, giving birth, so to speak, to the titular character. Master Poo, as he is appropriately named, calls out to his “father” as he is carried away through an underground cesspool—how an outhouse is connected to any kind of sewer system is never explained, one of the many whimsical flourishes that drives this narrative—there meeting a rat by the name of Irving who becomes his devoted travel companion. The actual Poe is suffering from writer’s block, losing his inspiration due to the loss of his young wife, Virginia. She visits him in ghostly form, telling the frustrated author that his desire to no longer dream (of her, ostensibly) has resulted in the loss of creativity. MacPherson, here, is equating the miniature Poe/Poo not only with imagination and inspiration, but also (and humorously) with excrement. Yet, this is not a completely irreverent treatment of Poe, as the stakes involved in this strange adventure take on an increasingly philosophical tone.

As the story unfolds, the relationship between Poe and Poo becomes more complicated, with MacPherson embedding into the narrative a number of classic texts, or at least references to them. Many of the adventures take place around large bodies of water, one a literal “city in the sea.” On their journey, Poo and Irving travel through dark Raven Forest and meet King Nevermore—a large talking raven, of course—and there are quandaries throughout as to what is actually real. With allusions to “A Dream within a Dream,” the “real” Poe asks his ghostly Virginia if he is actually dreaming, to which his departed spouse replies, “We are all but ghosts in the dreamer’s dream.” Later she insinuates that the true Poe, or at least the imagination that has come to define the author, is like “a little lost lad trying to find his way home” (n.p.). In the second volume, this inspirational relationship is turned on its head, with the “real” Poe melding with the adventuring Poo (referred to at times as the “dream child”), becoming a disembodied guiding force in his quest against the Nightmare King, a nefarious force (apparently created by Poe/Poo himself) plotting to annihilate all creativity. As the title suggests, the events in this comic become increasingly surreal, and as of the time of this writing, MacPherson is still at work on a third volume that will supposedly carry the narrative beyond the temporary victory over the Nightmare King. What is significant here are not so much the labyrinthine, even convoluted, plot twists or the bizarre narrative embellishments, but the ways that MacPherson employs
the persona of Edgar Allan Poe to pose the kind of questions and themes embedded in the actual poems and short stories. So while *The Surreal Adventures of Edgar Allan Poe* sits at the “expansions” end of Hutcheon’s continuum, more of an inspiration than any act of narrative fidelity, it nonetheless adapts elements of Poe’s writings to create something wholly original.

Less surreal but equally fantastical is J. Barton Mitchell and Dean Kotz’s four-issue miniseries, *Poe*, later collected as a trade paperback (2010). Much like MacPherson’s, this comic takes as its point of departure the death of Poe’s wife, Virginia, a loss that has left the author despondent and mentally unstable. His well-being is overseen by an older brother, William, a constable who is currently trying to uncover a series of murders plaguing Baltimore. (The author’s real-life brother, William Henry Leonard Poe, was actually a sailor and died at a young age, well before the passing of Virginia.) Poe’s writings in mystery and the macabre—he is the originator of the modern detective genre, after all—give him an authority that William reluctantly recognizes, so the brother allows Edgar to accompany him on his investigations. In essence, fiction becomes “reality” as Edgar assumes a role played by one of his most famous creations, C. Auguste Dupin. What he and William uncover is a necromantic scheme perpetrated by someone named Roderick Usher, who uses the life force of others to bring back his dead, beloved sister, Madeline.

Similar to MacPherson, Mitchell and Kotz allude constantly to Poe’s famous poems and tales, but using more overtly the imagery and premises as scaffolding upon which to build their narrative. Usher appears throughout most of the story in a death mask and red cloak, embodying the “red death” that, he claims, has largely defined his lineage. He imprisons both Edgar and his brother in a dungeon, a pit, underneath the Usher home, where they are threatened with a bladed pendulum. Poe himself is haunted by dream-like visions of another world, followed constantly by a raven that will not let him forget his departed wife. The ghost of Virginia becomes a character in this narrative, and Mitchell mixes in a variety of other classic horror elements, as well, including mummification, Satanic incantation, and a golem. The literary allusions are both major and minor—at one point, Poe encounters Usher while drunk on Amontillado—and the protagonist is able to free himself of the Usher threat only by relinquishing his obsessions over Virginia, and in doing so says goodbye (literally) to the mysterious raven that has been hounding him throughout the narrative. One of the final images is a “kingdom by the sea” where the spirit of his dead wife finds herself, and the story ends as it begins, with a quote from “Annabel Lee.” Poe never attempts to remediate or translate with fidelity the actual poetry or stories. Instead, and much more so
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than do MacPherson, Mitchell and Kotz, it employs the literature loosely to create something like a "spin off," as understood by Hutcheon, that could conceivably have existed as one of Poe's gothic tales or even a conundrum for Dupin.

Adapting Poe in Anthologies and Collections

One of the most innovative, and most varied, means of adapting Poe's writing has been in anthologies. Since Eureka Productions launched Graphic Classics in 2001—indeed, the Edgar Allan Poe volume was the very first in the series—Tom Pomplun, the editor, has offered contemporary artists the opportunity to adapt classic texts in unique ways. As a result, every volume of Graphic Classics provides a multifaceted reading of a single author, or a single literary theme, that challenges traditional interpretive strategies. The latter can best be exemplified through the original Classics Illustrated comic-book series (1941–1971), where the adapters followed closely the original storyline, presented the narrative in a straightforward manner, left little in the way of narrative nuance or ambiguity, and rarely represented anything other than a detached omniscient perspective, with almost all visuals at eye-level and panels presented in medium to long shots. It was a kind of "factory" formula that, according to Geoffrey O'Brien, resulted in "officially sanctioned blandness" (qtd. in Richardson 81). Pomplun's Graphic Classics: Edgar Allan Poe editions—there have been four so far, each subsequent one containing new adaptations not found in the previous ones—employ a multitude of creators, each with his or her own style and narrative philosophy, so that the art and visual character vary from one adaptation to the next.

In the most recent fourth edition, there are three new adaptations of Poe's short fiction, all of which are rendered in a more or less realistic style. Yet, the artist of each is able to provide his own spin on the story's tone, adjusting the illustration style to reflect the setting and set the appropriate tenor. Carlo Vergara's "The Pit and the Pendulum," adapted by David Hontiveros, relies largely on heavy blacks and grays, punctuated with extreme close ups and skewed visual angles, all of which contributes to the uncertainty and impending doom the protagonist experiences. Hontiveros and Vergara even capture the victim's ambiguous psychological state. The opening five panels of the story seamlessly link the seven black-robed judges with the seven candles visible on the courtroom table, and those seven candles become a series of hellish figures, eventually morphing into a swirling vortex that transitions into
At first they wore the aspect of charity, and seemed white and slender angels who would save me...

...but then, all at once, they became meaningless spectres, and I saw that from them there would be no help.

Then silence, and stillness, and night were the universe.

Then, the figures of the judges vanished, darkness supervened, and all sensations appeared swallowed up in a mad rushing descent as of the soul into Hades.


utter darkness (fig. 1). If we have any doubts as to the narrator's state of mind—and, accordingly, his ability to reveal and make sense of his surroundings—Vergara's art provides us with no conclusive answers. In this sense, the creators retain a sense of indeterminacy so common to Poe's fiction, a kind of "romantic irony" that encourages multiple, even contradictory interpretations. As G. R. Thompson has argued,

Almost everything that Poe wrote is qualified by, indeed controlled by, a prevailing duplicity or irony [serving as a] device that allowed him both to contemplate his obsession with death, murder, torture, insanity, guilt, loss, and fear of total annihilation in a meaningless universe, and also to detach and protect himself from the obsession [Poe's Fiction 9].

This ambiguous stance allows the author not only to blur the lines between reality and imagination, but also to undercut any definitive reading that may imply certain intellectual presumptions. The narrator's experiences at the
hands of the inquisition are not clear cut, and as such, they beg us to ask for more context before rendering judgment—something his accusers may be denying him.

The other two new stories in this collection are equally revealing. The art in Rod Lott and Gerry Alanguilan’s adaptation of “The Black Cat” is similarly realistic—in this instance, with a clear line style—but the frantic state of mind of the narrator is called into question in two ways. The background surrounding the action is often crosshatched and textured, giving the visuals a kinetic energy that underscores the psychological drama. More significantly, Alanguilan’s strategic choice of paneling, often irregular and askew, breaks from the traditional nine-panel grid layout, and as such, suggests the narrator’s uncertain mental state, made questionable even further by his alcoholism and his obsession over the cat. In other words, the dubious perspective of the narrator finds expression in the graphic layout of the story. In Rafael Nieves and Dan Dougherty’s “William Wilson,” obscured visuals add to the uncertainty. Throughout much of the comic, the doppelgänger Wilson’s face, not that of the narrator Wilson, is hidden from view, concealed partially or entirely. And after the visage of the narrator’s classmate is finally revealed, the twin is often presented within, or at least associated with, some kind of physical border: doorways, windows, recessed panels, and picture frames. All of this has the effect of mirroring, as if the narrator is looking at a reflection of and provoking himself (one of the main themes of Poe’s original story). Indeed, in the final pages of the story, the lines between reality and fantasy are intentionally blurred when the narrator finally confronts his double, and does so in a mirror. In essence, Nieves and Dougherty use one of comics’ most essential features, framing or paneling, as a way of thematically emphasizing the ambiguities embedded in the original.

These examples from the Graphic Classics volume are closer to the fidelity end of Hutcheon’s continuum, not only in their adherence to the basic outline of Poe’s stories, but in their aesthetic tone. The creators use the elements of the comics form to bring out the original texts’ duplicity, or what Thompson has characterized as their “romantic irony” (“Development of Romantic Irony” 267). The same could be said of the stories in another recent Eureka volume, Graphic Classics: Edgar Allan Poe’s Tales of Mystery (2011). While adaptations such as “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” are straightforward, realistic, and generally unequivocal in their visual renderings—and in this way, not entirely capturing the spirit of Poe’s romances—others use the artist’s style to bring out more fully the text’s gothic uncertainty. In “Berenice,” Tom Pomplun and Nelson Evergreen utilize acute
subjective perspectives (the equivalent in film of low-angle and Dutch angle shots) and extreme close ups, especially on mouths and teeth, to bring out the uncanny obsession the narrator, Egaeus, has for his cousin Berenice. The story even ends with an “explosion” of teeth emanating from Egaeus’s box as it drops to the floor, the bloodied dentals appearing to leap out toward the reader, accentuating the horrific infatuation. In “The Man of the Crowd,” adapted by Rich Rainey, we have another narrator with a monomaniacal obsession. What marks this particular adaptation is Brad Teare’s art, which is woodblock-based, and thus, courser and more primitive than others in the collection. This style brings out the psychological nature of the original: the unnamed narrator is inexplicably drawn to a mysterious man as he moves through the crowded streets of London, and whose motives and actions he is unable to decipher. The unknowability of his subject matter—“I can learn no more of him or his deeds. For some secrets do not permit themselves to be told” (93)—is reflected in the ill-defined contours of the illustrations. Indeed, Teare’s rough-hewn art and dusky color palette bring out the thematic underpinnings of this story, one (similar to “William Wilson”) that suggests a mysterious and dark doubling.

Other stories in this Tales of Mystery collection function similarly, and almost all are set in a time period reflected in the original tale. (Despite the thematic twists many creators make when adapting texts in the various Eureka volumes, most are generally true to Poe’s temporal setting.) The one exception to this is Ronn Sutton’s adaption of “The Tell-Tale Heart,” which is placed in more contemporary times. The narrator in this version is a female punk rocker, and Sutton turns it into a gothic confession of generational tensions, where the young daughter becomes obsessed with eliminating her aging father. This translation in time, framing a particular Poe narrative within more contemporary contexts, rests at the heart of another anthology, Nevermore (2008). It comprises adaptations of nine classic stories and poems, as well as a two-page biography of Poe that closes out the volume. The stories stand out because of their temporal incongruities, and this, along with the occasional liberties taken with the plots, makes the collection one of the most notable recent examples of Poe translated into other media.

For example, Jamie Delano and Steve Pugh’s “The Pit and the Pendulum” is set in a context reminiscent of Orwell’s 1984. The prison has a depersonalizing and eerily antiseptic feel—metal surroundings, smooth steel fixtures, and sharp blades characterize this pit—and whereas Hontiveros and Vergara’s adaptation in the Graphic Classics collection retains the darkness found in Poe’s original tale, with its heavy use of blacks and grays, this version is brightly lit throughout. Delano and Pugh even switch up the perspective of the impend-
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ing doom. Instead of the classic swinging pendulum being lowered, the victim/narrator himself becomes a pendulum, slowly descending toward a pit of blades. What is more, references to a camera eye and a wall of television screens suggest a kind of Foucauldian surveillance not found in the other adaptation. Ian Edginton and D’Israeli bend their version of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” to an even greater degree. The story is set in the year 2859, and C. August Dupin’s companion and sounding board—the unnamed narrator in Poe’s original—is now a cyber being, a “court appointed personal optronic encoder” assigned to keep tabs on the detective (38). The events are revealed from a detached, omniscient point-of-view, thereby enhancing the futuristic and mechanized tone of the narrative. Dupin uses his court-appointed technology to analyze the data he collects at the Rue Morgue crime scene (e.g., run tests on evidence and generate holograms to recall witness testimony and speculate on motive). As if this version of the story were not divergent enough, Edginton and D’Israeli make the offending orangutan the husband and father of the victims, Madame L’Espanaye and her daughter. In the original, M. L’Espanaye has no place in the story. But here, we learn that he has had an acrimonious split from his wife, and that as a result, she conspired to have L’Espanaye’s consciousness transferred—via “memory en-gram overlays” (47)—into that of an orangutan. The betrayed husband’s fury, coupled with the simian’s strength, lead to the brutal murders.

Other stories in the Nevermore collection are set in more recognizable, contemporary times. In Dan Whitehead and Shane Ivan Oakley’s “The Fall of the House of Usher,” Roderick is a former head-banging musician who inherits a fortune and then secludes himself, along with his twin sister, in an old decaying mansion. The narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart,” adapted by Jeremy Slater and drawn by Alice Duke, is a blind volunteer at a community center for the visually impaired—in this way, retaining Poe’s original emphasis on eyes—who becomes obsessed with and tormented by her client, whom she claims can actually see. Leah Moore and John Reppion’s adaptation of “The Black Cat” (with art by James Fletcher) is set in a carnival, with a degenerate ringmaster who plots to get rid of the show’s ineffectual and expensive-to-maintain black panther. “The Masque of the Red Death,” adapted by Adam Prosser and illustrated by Erik Rangel, takes place, appropriately enough, at a comics convention, where the organizers attempt to keep out a deadly plague that surrounds them, telling the attending cosplayers—reminiscent of the masked guests in Poe’s original tale—to “forget about the nasty ol’ reality for a while” and party down at the costume contest (115). But perhaps the most notable adaptation in the collection, certainly one of the most socially conscious, is
Drawn from the Classics

David Berner and Natalie Sandells’s “The Oval Portrait.” Here, we learn the secrets behind a famous movie star, Liliana Kuschke, whose never-aging visage is linked to a photographer obsessed with capturing the true inner beauty of Lily when she was younger. The story’s message is similar to that of the original short tale, but in this contemporary retelling, Berner and Sandells effectively contextualize their remediation within our current image-driven culture. Instead of speculating on the aesthetic links between beauty and its representation, this adaptation suggests the grimmer, more deadening impact of celebrity, where subjectivity is all but annihilated.

Adapting Single Tales

The power of anthologies, such as Nevermore and the Graphic Classics volumes, rests in the fact that readers are presented with diverse application of interpretation, both narratively and visually. However, in many instances these individual adaptations in a collection are limited in scope, as the creators have only so much space to encapsulate their vision of an Edgar Allan Poe story or poem. They may reveal the gist of the plot, but in the necessary edits they may truncate (intentionally or unintentionally) significant literary elements of the original, even the story’s best defining features. Our understanding of Dupin in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” may be incomplete by radically changing the tale’s focalization, and the full impact of imagery could be lost if the “Haunted Palace” section is eliminated from “The Fall of the House of Usher.” Such compromises do not necessarily suggest that the adaptations are inferior or secondary to the original, because much of the pleasure derived from transmedia retellings comes from experiencing repetitions with variation (Hutcheon 4). Still, the logistics of an edited collection may necessitate an unfortunate condensation of an adapted narrative, where artists may feel hamstrung and that they could provide a fuller rendering given more page space. In solo-text adaptations, where one story or poem is given a full treatment in a single comic-book issue or graphic novel, these kinds of limitations can become less of an issue. The artists have more room to explore, more of an opportunity not only to tell the story, but to employ a variety of narrative nuances that may or may not have been embedded in the original source. In this way, and based on a different criterion, we may be inclined to judge an adaptation more thoroughly, even more severely, given the expanded creative freedoms.

Since 2008 there have been several solo-text adaptations of Poe, with creators exploring a single work to greater or lesser degrees. The short-lived
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publisher Powerpop Comics devoted the first and only issue in its “Classics” series to “The Black Cat” (2009). Adapted by Hobby Jones and S. M. Vidaurri, the comic is basically faithful to the original, even to the point of using in places the exact wording, or very close paraphrasing, from the original. In fact, almost the entire story is related through extradiegetic recitation boxes, or the narrator’s “voice-overs,” as he describes the events leading up to his condemnation. (There are only four panels in the story that include speech balloons.) Other than that, the narrative is carried by the art, which visually reflects and adds little to the text. So although Jones and Vidaurri are able to play out the entire story in this single issue, they never elaborate on or embellish the tale in any way that would make it unique or allow it to vary much from the original.

Similar to the Powerpop Comics adaptation, Bert M. Herholz relies heavily on Poe’s original text, telling much of his story through extradiegetic narration boxes. But in The Casque of Amontillado (2012), he brings his distinctive gothic style of illustration to the tale so that the adaptation resonates with a unique personal feel. Inspired by both the Mexican Day of the Dead and his friendship with Philadelphia poet of the macabre, Susurrus Din, as he indicates in the book’s “Production Notes,” Herholz follows Poe’s original in its entirety. He does not add anything extraneous, nor does he delete or diminish any major elements. His “spin” on the story is his art, a sparse style that fully utilizes gothic iconography. The dark, ill-defined catacombs—Herholz’s backgrounds have a blurred effect—serve as an appropriate environment for his characters with their elongated torsos, emaciated physiques, slim sharp fingers, and tired shadowed eyes.

Less visually distinctive is Matthew K. Manning’s The Fall of the House of Usher (2013). Much like that of Herholz, this adaptation follows the story closely, residing on the far “fidelity” end of Huccheon’s reception continuum, including references to both “The Haunted Palace” and the Mad Trist of Launcelot Canning. Many, if not most, adaptations of “Usher” fail to reference one or both of these intertexts, but Manning devotes several pages to both, particularly the latter. This is significant, in that the violent and absurd action of Mad Trist foretells, as well as parallels, the horrific appearance of Madeline, adding to the ambiguous, dream-like tone of this section. (At this point in the story, there is a question as to the narrator’s wakefulness.) And while Jim Jimenez’s art is not sophisticated, the use of color goes a long way in distinguishing this adaptation. The artist uses color, specifically a sickly lime green, as a visual braiding device, linking together the horrific elements: the tarn, the fog, the Usher mansion windows, Roderick’s music and writings, the Mad Trist section, the eerie sound effects, and the fissure that runs all the way down the
House of Usher. Indeed, the glowing green crack stands out when the narrator arrives at the house, and it appears prominently at the end before its fall, visually linking the precarious façade of the house and the fractured mental state of Usher.

In addition, Manning and Jimenez's version of Poe's classic story raises the issue of adaptation and its relation to audience. The book is published by Capstone, a producer of educational books for libraries and classrooms, and it is clearly intended for a younger audience. With its simple art and straightforward storytelling, it reads like a study guide, what other publishers such as Cliff Notes and Saddleback have done with classic literature, and similar in tone to the original Classics Illustrated comics. (In fact, there is a glossary in the back, as well as study questions, to aid young readers in their comprehension.)

In stark contrast to this, and much further away from the fidelity end of Hutcheon's continuum, is Wendy Pini's webcomic, Masque of the Red Death (2007–2010). It is a sophisticated, futuristic, and highly erotic narrative, based largely on "The Masque of the Red Death." Pini, known primarily for Elfquest, the long-running series she co-writes with her husband, Richard, applies her fantastical sensibilities to a gothic tale about ego and death (in fact, the original 1842 title of Poe's story was "The Mask of the Red Death: A Fantasy"). In her reinterpretation, Anton Prosper—the Prince Prosper of Poe's original—inherits his father, immense fortune, and then secludes himself on an island. He is a single-minded and uncompromising man of science, and he uses his wealth to develop a nanotechnology that will not only cure disease, but also theoretically extend life indefinitely. He meets another brilliant scientist by the name of Steffan Kabala, someone he first encountered as a youth and who had subsequently possessed a deep infatuation for Anton. The two develop an intense relationship, psychological as well as sexual, until the Prosper family business rival, Tono Trankule, manipulates Steffan in order to obtain Anton's highly secret research. As a result, the nanotechnology becomes corrupted, infects computer systems worldwide, and by interacting with the biological technology already imbedded in most humans, creates a plague that rapidly kills off the population. Only Anton and his isolated guests remain immune from this "red death"—and victims do become a deteriorating mass of red meat once afflicted—but, as in Poe's gothic tale, their attempts to live above the disease all come to naught. Anton's mix of idealism, aloofness, and hubris are what eventually bring his end (fig. 2).

What makes Pini's version of "The Masque of the Red Death" so significant is its elaborate nature. Perhaps more effectively than any other adapter, she has created a complex narrative world from a relatively simple premise,
developing a story to the point that it takes on a life completely outside of Edgar Allan Poe's shadow. All of the principles are there—a detached and self-involved ruler, the frivolity of the privileged class, a disease running rampant, and even the colored chambers—but Pini's *Red Death* is wholly other and stands on its own. Unlike most other adaptations, there are no visual
references to the nineteenth-century author, no obligatory allusions to his
classic writings, no iconic insertions (e.g., ravens, pendulums, gothic mansions)
that have become code imagery for "Poe." In all, Pini's webcomic stands as an
illustrative example of how to adapt the classic writer without allowing the
narrative to become completely subsumed by the legend.

An Auteur Approach to Adapting Poe

While anthologies provide a multifaceted look at Poe's world, giving read-
ers varied interpretations of the author's subject matter, collections by a single
creator (or creative team) allow for a deeper appreciation of a singular vision.
Artists can adapt what at first glance may appear to be a dissimilar collection
of Poe's poems and stories, and craft a larger work that bears the stamp of an
auteur, providing a more unified message and even giving narrative coherency
to the various fragments. One such creative team is Denise Despeyroux and
Miquel Serratosa. In a series of three adaptations for Enslow Publishers—
"The Gold Bug" (sic), "The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether," and
"The Fall of the House of Usher"—they provide a sampling of Poe's fiction
collected under the publisher's Dark Graphic Novels series (although, arguably,
only one of those Poe stories is unambiguously gothic or "dark"). These
translations are generally faithful to the originals with a distinctive cartoony art.
This makes sense, as the target audience is younger readers. (Similar to Cap-
stone, Enslow is a publisher of K–12 educational books intended for use in
classrooms and libraries.) The same is true of Pedro Rodríguez's adaptation
of "The Black Cat," part of another Enslow book, Chilling Tales of Horror:
Dark Graphic Short Stories (2013). Indeed, Rodríguez's art is even more
rounded and iconic, or cartoony, than Serratosa's.

A more sophisticated style can be found in the Classics Illustrated Deluxe
edition of The Murders in the Rue Morgue and Other Tales by Edgar Allan Poe
(2013). Originally appearing in French, the title story, along with "The Gold-
Bug" and "The Mystery of Marie Roget," stand out because they are all tales
of mystery or narratives of detection. Poe is most popularly known as a writer
of gothic horror, and while "Rue Morgue" has seen quite a number of adap-
tations over the years, his other detective narratives have received relatively
little attention. Even if such a tale is collected, it is usually done within the
context of horror, accentuating the terror of the orangutan or the skull-shape
of the golden bug. The comics in this Classics Illustrated Deluxe collection,
much more so than in other adaptations, are very heavily word-based with
multiple expository text boxes, panels filled with handwriting, and extended dialogue contained within word balloons. They would be composed significantly by what Scott McCloud would refer to as “word specific,” or perhaps even “additive,” text-image arrangements (153–54). This is due to the fact that these are, as Poe referred to them, tales of ratiocination, narratives based on characters’ logical thought processes and their abilities to reason conclusions from both observations and deductive premises. As such, it is necessary for the adapters to emphasize intellectual analysis, best represented through dialogue and text, in order to capture the nuances of the mystery. All three stories in the Papercutz edition convey the feeling of “literariness,” not only because of the word-specific emphases, but also because of the rich, realistic art as well as the narrative pacing. The adapters resist the temptation to, as well as had no need to, compress the story, letting the events unfold gradually and in their own time—a significant characteristic of a mystery.

However, the clearest and most telling example of an auteur approach to adapting Poe can be found in the work of Richard Corben. In 2012, he began publishing a series of brand new interpretations of the short stories and poems. Indeed, Corben has a long history with Edgar Allan Poe, beginning in the 1970s and his black-and-white work (along with Richard Margopoulos) in the magazines Creepy and Eerie. In 1984 he released A Corben Special: House of Usher from Pacific Comics, and in 2006 he and Margopoulos adapted ten pieces in Edgar Allan Poe’s Haunt of Horror, published by Marvel Comics. So recently when Corben began revisiting Poe in the pages of the monthly anthology series Dark Horse Presents, he came at it with a rich history behind him. Those texts adapted for the anthology include “The City in the Sea,” “Berenice,” “The Sleeper,” “Shadow,” “The Assignation,” and “Alone” (Feb. 2012–Oct. 2013). He also produced a series of Poe-related comic-book single issues—and in one case, a two-issue story—to supplement and expand upon his contributions to the Dark Horse serial: Edgar Allan Poe’s The Conqueror Worm (Nov. 2012), Edgar Allan Poe’s The Fall of the House of Usher (May 2013 and Jun. 2013), Edgar Allan Poe’s The Raven and the Red Death (Oct. 2013), Edgar Allan Poe’s The Premature Burial (Apr. 2014), and Edgar Allan Poe’s Morella and the Murders in the Rue Morgue (Jun. 2014). All of these recent Poe adaptations, the six short anthology contributions and the issue-length stories, will be collected in a single volume in fall 2014, Edgar Allan Poe’s Spirits of the Dead.

What is most significant about this burst of adaptive creativity is the artist’s choice to stray significantly from the originals, inserting new subject matter into the tales, narrativizing the images and controlling metaphors in the poetry, injecting his stories with subordinate themes, and combining intertextual
elements to create new hybrid narratives. Some of Corben's recent adaptations remain faithful to the originals, only slightly altering the action and speech or inserting additional actants. For example, in his retelling of "The Assignation," the artist retains the general outline of the story and only changes a few elements for purposes of brevity and cohesion. Instead of being a completely mysterious figure, in the traditional gothic sense, the rescuer of Marchesa Aphrodite's child is the protagonist's gondolier, and the artistic splendor of his residence—in the original story, its abundance stuns the narrator—is downplayed. And in "Shadow," Corben again follows the outline of Poe's short story, even preserving the number of characters grieving the loss of the young Zoilus. However, one of the seven fellow mourners is Mag the Hag, a figure created specifically for his recent series of Poe adaptations. In "Shadow," she is primarily a narrative catalyst, inciting Oinos and instigating a fatal encounter with the enigmatic shadow (and ending more violently than in Poe's tale). But in the adaptation series as a whole, Mag serves as a mysterious narrative guide or host who speaks directly to the reader, introduces stories and gives context, provides levity during grim encounters, and generally hovers over the action as an observer or commentator. In this way, she functions as a framing device and a cohesive presence that links together most of Corben's recent Poe adaptations.

However, there are instances where the artist takes significant liberties with his comics translations, especially for thematic impact. One such example is "The City in the Sea," where Corben narrativizes the short poem into a tale of racial violence. In his version, a shipwrecked merchant confronts a group of shrouded characters who inquire of his dilemma. The survivor tells them that he had to dump his merchandise during a violent storm in order to save his ship. When his interlocutors finally reveal themselves, and after the merchant explains that his "stock" was actually captured slaves, we discover that the shrouded figures are all African men in chains, at which point, the entire island falls into the sea. Although critics have read Poe's "The City in the Sea" as a prophetic tale of race in the United States (Erkkila 55), this theme is not apparent, and Corben teases out this message with visuals that are essential to the comics medium. He performs a similar feat with "The Sleeper." Whereas the original visualizes a graveyard and focuses on the loss of a beautiful woman, evolving into a poetic rumination on death, Corben's version is an extended and dramatic tale of adultery, murder, and revenge.

In his comic-book-length adaptations, Corben further embellishes Poe's narratives. With "The Conqueror Worm," he turns the metaphor of the stage into a literal puppet theater and expands the poem into a tale of horror. In
"The Premature Burial" Corben retains the horrific fear of being entombed alive but injects into the story references to romantic betrayal and necrophilia. He employs a similarly deviant premise in "Morella," where he has the widowed protagonist take his wife's daughter, not his own, to bed. In "The Cask of Amontillado," Montressor confesses not to the reader, but to Fortunato's widow (who has no presence in the original) years after the murderous event. What is more, at the end of Corben's version, Montressor's final act is to commit suicide, alluding to a mysterious and incurable ailment: "I've already received my death sentence from a higher authority. I've decided not to wait for the illness... a dose of morphine, and I'm gone" (n. pag.). In Poe's original, the "sentence" that Montressor receives is his own nagging guilt—there's even the suggestion that the narrator may be confessing his crime to an interested party (Thompson, Poe's Fiction 14)—but in Corben's graphic translation, he is unapologetic and pompous. As such, Mag the Hag's parting words in this story, "In pace requiescat," bears less irony.

Yet perhaps the most distinctive feature of Corben's recent Poe adaptations is the interwoven quality of his narratives, where he combines fundamental elements from two (at times, arguably three) different stories or poems to create a wholly original version. He does this with "The Masque of the Red Death." The story begins with Mag the Hag wandering a desolate landscape, "looking for a story" among the ruins (n. pag.). Eventually she finds a disease-ridden soul, one who begins describing a "fair and stately palace" where once "banners yellow, glorious, and golden on its roof did float and flow." This reference to "The Haunted Palace" morphs into the tale of Prince Prospero and his ill-fated celebration. Upon the appearance of the red death, his castle comes crashing down, much as the House of Usher does, with Corben seamlessly interlinking the two narratives of impudence and monomania.

Roderick Usher's fractured mental state is the occasion of yet another Poe mash-up. In his new version of "The Fall of the House of Usher," Corben combines the oft-adapted tale with the themes undergirding "The Oval Portrait." Indeed, of all the artist's recent revisions, this one is the most ambitious, played out over two comic-book issues. The story begins in a familiar manner, with the story's narrator, here appropriately named Allan, making his way through bleak terrain to the Usher home. He arrives to find Roderick completely consumed by his art, especially when painting a portrait of his sister, Madeline. As the story unfolds, Allan learns that his friend has become obsessed with his sister to the point of incest. Although Madeline eventually dies and is interred, as in Poe's story, she will nonetheless "live on" in Roderick's painting, responding to Roderick's "advances"—yet another creepy sexual
twist, similar to those found in “Morella” and “The Premature Burial.” The ending of Corben’s new tale nonetheless retains the gothic ambiguity embedded in Poe’s original. Just as Madeline’s return from the dead is intentionally problematized in the 1839 version—the narrator falls asleep just prior to her horrific entrance, thereby introducing the possibility of dreamscape and throwing the entire conclusion into question—Corben is similarly equivocal. Madeline appears to return, taking form after her portrait is destroyed, although there is no explanation or causal links that are graphically presented. The reader can assume, though, given Corben’s use of “The Oval Portrait,” that she has been “released” from her aesthetic imprisonment. As in Poe’s story, the destruction of the Usher estate (and family) is due to Roderick’s mania; but in Corben’s reinterpretation, those obsessions are inextricably linked to matters of art. It is no accident that the catalyst here is visual representation, making Corben’s new “Usher” a self-reflexive discourse on the power, and limitations, of illustrative art (fig. 3).
Illustrating the Uncertainty Within—ROYAL

Richard Corben, in his ongoing engagements with the nineteenth-century writer, stands as perhaps the most exhaustive and most ambitious comics artist adapting the work of Edgar Allan Poe. However, as all of the other creators discussed in this survey demonstrate, the field of comics adaptation as it relates to Poe is rich, vibrant, and truly varied. The success of a graphic translation is not based on its fidelity to plot, its retention of the original themes, or how realistically its visuals are rendered. In fact, straying from authorial intent, bending the narrative to fit particular agendas, and employing a seemingly discrepant style can bring a text to life in unexpected ways. Even when attempted faithfully, new graphic interpretations of classical or other-medium texts tell us just as much, if not more, about the adapter than they do about the original author. In comics, part of the thrill of re-visioning texts is discovering their capacities and the weight they can bear. With the literature of Poe, that potential is apparently boundless.

NOTES

1. Inge goes on to observe that only Herman Melville and Mark Twain have come closest to Poe's impact in comics, although I would add to that the work of H. P. Lovecraft, whose comics-based adaptations almost rival those of Poe's. For a further analysis of Poe adaptations in comics, see Inge's "Poe and the Comics Connection."

2. See my 2008 essay, "Sequential Poe-try."

3. Traveling along Hutcheon's continuum from the "fidelity" extremity, one finds works that attempt "true" faithfulness to the original, those that condense or truncate the prior text, those that retell or revision popular works (sometimes in parody), and finally on down to those texts that use the originals as jumping off points for something decidedly different (171).

4. Examples here would include the narrators or protagonists in Matthew K. Manning and Jim Jimenez's The Fall of the House of Usher, Pedro Rodriguez's "The Black Cat," and various selections from Denise Despeyroux and Miquel Serratosa's Dark Graphic Tales by Edgar Allan Poe.


6. This volume, number twenty-one in the Graphic Classics series, includes texts originally adapted in other Graphic Classics collections, such as "Eldorado," "Hop-Frog," "The Oval Portrait," "King Pest," and "The Masque of the Red Death." As I have discussed many of these stories in my earlier essay on Poe in comics, I will not address them here.

7. Papercutz's Classics Illustrated Deluxe line has a very different format from the original Classics Illustrated comic books, although it revives the famous title.

8. Readers will recognize Mag as an allusion to the many narrative hosts who have shepherded readers through classic horror comics. These include, most famously, EC Comics' Crypt-Keeper, Vault-Keeper, and Old Witch, as well as the many characters they inspired, such as Uncle Creepy and Uncle Eerie in Warren Publications' black-and-white comics and DC Comics' Cain, Able, Eve, and Destiny.
9. In a recent interview, Corben describes Mag the Hag as a device of both connection and disassociation. In a collection of adaptations where readers may not know the originals or have many points of reference, she serves as “an element of familiarity. So there is a sense of friendly continuity between stories and books. Also, it is a way of distancing the reader from feeling he is dealing with uncomfortable concepts” (Interview).

10. It is important to note here that in his recent Poe comics, Corben is revisiting texts that he had previously adapted at least once before, and in completely different manners. “Usher,” “The Oval Portrait,” “The Conqueror Worm,” “Berenice,” and “Shadow” had all received a graphic treatment prior to Corben’s recent Dark Horse comics, and “The Raven” had even been adapted on two different occasions by the artist.

**Works Cited**


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Illustrating the Uncertainty Within—ROYAL


