

# **“My Baptismal Name is Egaeus”: Assessing Hellenic Allusions in Poe's “Berenice”**

## **"My baptismal name is Egaeus": Evaluando las Alusiones Helénicas en "Berenice" de Edgar Allan Poe**

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### **Resumen**

“Berenice” de Edgar Allan Poe ha sido estudiado de forma diacrónica desde numerosas perspectivas y, a lo largo de los años, algunos investigadores han conectado la historia con la biografía del autor. Además, la elección del nombre del protagonista por parte de Poe, Egaeus, hecho que podría indicar influencia helénica en la producción literaria del autor, no ha sido ignorada por los investigadores. Aún así, incluso en estudios meticulosos como el de Silverman (1992) se puede observar que las implicaciones de Poe con el pasado heleno de Berenice no han sido examinadas en profundidad. El presente estudio tiene como objetivo delimitar estas alusiones helénicas, ofreciendo una conexión adicional entre la narrativa de Poe y la Grecia clásica, que no ha sido suficientemente estudiado por ningún miembro relevante en el campo de estudio de Poe. palabras.

**Palabras clave:** Poe, Berenice, alusiones helénicas, Egaeus, historia helénica.

### **Abstract**

Edgar Allan Poe's “Berenice” has been investigated from a number of different perspectives and, over the years, scholars have particularly connected this story to Poe's biography. Furthermore, Poe's choice to name his main protagonist Egaeus, fact which may indicate a Hellenic influence on the author's literary production, has not been overlooked. However, even in meticulous studies such as Silverman's (1992) one can observe that Poe's engagement with the Hellenic past in “Berenice” has not been examined in depth. The present paper aims to delineate Hellenic allusions that are apparent in the

tale, offering an additional connection between Poe's narrative and ancient Greece which has not been sufficiently emphasized by relevant literature in this field of Poe studies.

**Keywords:** Poe, Berenice, Hellenic allusions, Egaeus, Hellenic history.

Edgar Allan Poe's "Berenice" is undoubtedly one of his most captivating short stories and, as relevant literature has rightly noted in the past, it is dominated by the element of horror. It was first published in 1835 in the *Southern Literary Messenger* and its mysterious ambience has been studied in depth, drawing the attention of researchers up until very recently from a number of different perspectives—see, for instance, McGill (2003); Stefanou (2013); Inge (2013); and McAlister (2013). Its protagonist, Egaeus, is portrayed as a young scholarly man who grew up in a dark mansion with "gloomy, gray, hereditary walls" (Poe, 1978: 209). His life, however, appears to be burdensome since he suffers from an obsessive disorder called "monomania", which ultimately forces him to lead a life in which he "struggled in vain against its strange and irresistible influence", as Poe makes clear (1978: 215).

Indications of Poe's indebtedness to foreign literatures can be encountered in a variety of previous systematic studies such as those of Palmer Cobb (1908), Gustav Gruener (1904) or even in Thomas Ollive Mabbott's (1919) seminal article, "Some Classical Allusions in Poe". Notwithstanding, after continuous efforts to unearth research on Poe's engagement with Hellenic literature, I was able to verify that this field of Poe studies has not been sufficiently emphasized so far. Identically as in the case of a number of other tales, I notice that Poe employs Hellenic references in his attempt to construct the narrative. For instance, in his "Mellonta Tauta", "How to Write a Blackwood Article," and "The Colloquy of Monos and Una" the Bostonian author makes undisguised allusions to the Hellenic past that have been acknowledged in previous studies. The present paper aims to analyze "Berenice" from a Hellenic point of view, drawing a clear comparison between Poe's work and Hellenic antiquity and delineating Hellenic allusions that appear to be concealed in it; some of these references may have been overlooked by relevant literature, as I shall later demonstrate.

According to the story's plot, Egaeus does not live alone. Readers soon discover that another person has shared the same residence with him throughout his childhood: her name is Berenice. In the past, Daniel Hoffman has justly attempted to connect the tale with Poe's biography by setting up a clear comparison between the narrative's female

protagonist and Poe's cousin who also happened to be his wife. More specifically, he asserted that "as was true of Poe's own wife, Virginia, is the cousin of the poor fellow who tells their tale" (1972: 238). Being another example of Poe's stories that incorporate an incestuous affair, "Berenice" soon reveals a relationship between the homonymous female protagonist and Egaeus which ultimately leads to a marriage. As the narrator describes, in contrast with Egaeus Berenice grew up "agile, graceful, and overflowing with energy" (Poe, 1978: 210). Nevertheless, her life is burdened by a degenerative disease that, as the protagonist further explains, "fell like the simoon upon her frame" (1978: 211).

One afternoon Egaeus and Berenice both find themselves in the same room. When she smiles at him his "monomania" takes over and he starts fixating on her teeth. Unable to escape from his de cease, he imagines himself holding and examining them carefully. "The weird images in Poe's love tales reach below the level of linguistic formation to establish the similitudes they make of certain bodily parts", remarks Hoffman (1972: 239), perhaps building his study on Marie Bonaparte's (1949) assertions that Berenice's teeth might be a representation of the female reproductive organ. As far as I am aware, the latter Poe scholar (1949: 218) was the first critic who set this idea forth, while Marita Nadal Blasco's (2003) more recent study adds that "one of the most recurrent readings of 'Berenice' is that of male fear of female sexuality: Berenice's teeth evoke the vagina dentata" (2003: 359). Leland Person (2001) also makes notice of the above connection by comparing the extraction of Berenice's teeth to surgical practices. As he specifically states, the implications for readers of Poe's time "involve a surgical intervention into a woman's sexual being—analogous in its violation to a clitoridectomy or oophorectomy (female castration)" (2001: 139). Hoffman's study also clarifies that "so complete is the working-out of these strange similitudes, these symbolic substitutions, in Edgar Poe's imagination that when he exercises artistic control upon the obsessive materials a whole set of related correspondences come into play" (1972: 239).

The plot is suddenly interrupted by a servant who enters the room and informs Egaeus that Berenice has passed away, leading the narrator into a state of despair. As Poe vividly describes, Egaeus had just woken up from a confusing and exciting dream. Upon regaining his consciousness, he realizes that a small box is in front of him. Another servant then enters the room and announces that Berenice's grave had been plundered and that her body had been deformed and buried alive. The story then proceeds with Egaeus realizing that his clothes are covered in blood and mud and, upon opening the box right in front of him, he chances on "thirty-two small, white, and ivory-looking substances that were

scattered to and fro about the floor,” Berenice’s teeth (1978: 219). As Arthur Brown further explains, Egeus “violates the poor girl’s grave to rip the teeth from her mouth. And these teeth represent des idées” (1996: 452). The same scholar also mentions that when the narrator makes “his own attempt to remember the main action of the tale, his violation of the prematurely buried Berenice, the distinction blurs” (1996: 452).

Like most critics, I have tried hard to observe the semantics of Berenice’s teeth since relevant literature has established that they are symbolic. “Those cherished teeth of ‘Berenice’ are material presences, keys to operations of mind and memory”, remarks Joan Dayan (1984: 493), and Arthur Brown adds that they are the most important element of all since the whole plot is built around them (1996: 452). This scholar also contends that “in this undying death Berenice has become, precisely, a literary object, existing only in description” (1996: 459), continuing his assertions by arguing that “the undying death is given form in the event of premature burial” (1996: 459). Tangentially, the gothic element is also dominant in the story. The dark scenery set along with the protagonists’ diseases overshadows the plot. After a nuanced reading of Brown’s study, I am inclined to side with his claims that Edgar Allan Poe dramatizes “the horror of the impossibility of dying, of undying death, made present in the existence of literature” (1996: 449).

As Ana Gonzalez Rivas and Francisco Garcia Jurado (2008) interestingly assert, “Berenice” maintains a dialogue with classical literature. Their study categorically mentions that “Egeus and Berenice have classical evocations” (2008: 2), rightly so in my view. One can effortlessly notice that Egeus himself is an unequivocal link to Hellenic mythology, fact which has been remarked on by other past studies. Jeffrey Meyers’ (2000) meticulous investigation on a number of tales, for instance, accurately connects the story to “Aegeus, father of Theseus and King of Athens” (2000: 77). Following his lead, the origin of the male protagonist’s name leads my paper to the famous Hellenic myth. As Pierre Grimal (1991) reminds us, Egeus<sup>1</sup> was a Greek king whose name is even nowadays reminded to the Greeks through the Aegean Sea. Hellenic mythology dictates the following:

*Ο Αιγέας είναι βασιλιάς της Αθήνας, πατέρας του Θησέα. Η αποστολή του Θησέα ήταν εναντίον του Μινώταυρου. Η ίδια αυτή η αποστολή προκάλεσε του Αιγέα στα γεράματά του. Ο Θησέας είχε υποσχεθεί αν επέστρεφε νικητής να υψώσει στο καράβι του άσπρα πανιά. Αν τα πλοία επέστρεφαν χωρίς αυτόν, θα έπρεπε να έχουν μαύρα πανιά. Χτυπημένος όμως από τρέλα ύστερα από κατάρρες της Αριάδνης, που την είχε εγκαταλείψει στην Νάξο, ο Θησέας ξέχασε να αλλάξει τα*

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<sup>1</sup> His name is found as *Αιγαίας* in ancient Greek mythology.

*πανιά. Ο Αιγέας που περίμενε την επιστροφή του Θησέα στην ακτή, βλέποντας το χρώμα των πανιών πίστεψε πως ο γιος του είχε χαθεί και ρίχτηκε στη θάλασσα, που από τότε πήρε το όνομά του, Αιγαίο Πέλαγος.<sup>2</sup> (1991: 51)*

Hayes rightly claims that there is a significant difference between the myth and Poe's narrative: "Poe's Egaeus, after inadvertently killing Berenice, his cousin and lover, survives to be tormented by remorse" (2000: 77). Nonetheless, he confines his study to a mere reference to this Hellenic motif, and he does not explore the profound connections of Poe's work to the ancient myth that might ultimately reveal the reason why Poe opted for this allusion. In answer to that study, I attempted to observe similarities between the two protagonists, Egaeus and the homonymous ancient king of Athens, which can be established through Brown's remarks; his work mentions the following: "Berenice" employs "the visionary character of Egaeus" in an attempt to stress the motif of "seeing realities as visions, and visions or ideas as realities" (1996: 453). In a similar manner, the homonymous Hellenic king commits suicide provoked by a vision that turns out to be false, accepting his son's death as something true. Peter Pesic (2002) carefully examines this particular scene in Hellenic mythology, precisely indicating that Theseus' oversight led Egaeus to the acceptance of a deception as fact (2002: 15-24). Hence, a similar motif of illusion and deception in both stories along with Poe's own use of the name Egaeus itself may indicate Poe's rationale upon choosing a name for his narrator. In the same vein, Hellenic Egaeus has diachronically been perceived in Hellenic tradition as a symbol of despair, fact that conforms with the Bostonian author's portrayal of his protagonist.

Apart from the above connection to Greece, though, a Hellenic allusion could also be established between Poe's female protagonist and the ancient Greek Berenice. Hayes' (2000) interesting chapter on "Berenice" contains the following comment which particularly draws my attention: "In the Greek poem by Callimachus, Berenice (whose four-syllable name means 'bringer of victory'), wife of Ptolemy of Egypt, promised her hair if her husband returned safely from the wars" (2000: 77). Similarly, Gonzalez and Garcia's (2008: 2) study also observes this particular Hellenic motif upon their exploration of death and love in Poe. However, even though their arguments are compelling and authentic,

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<sup>2</sup> Translated from Modern Greek as follows: Egaeus is the king of Athens and Theseus' father. The latter had a mission; to kill the Minotaur. This mission caused Egaeus' death. Theseus had promised to his father that if he won he would return using white sails and, if not, the boats would bear black sails instead. Theseus won the battle but forgot to change the sails. Egaeus, having watched the black sails on Egaeus' boats, thought that his son was dead and died by falling in the sea. Since that moment, this sea is called "the Aegean Sea". [My own translation]

these Poe scholars do not delve the depths of the significance of this allusion. As Bougas et al. (1980) describe in their recount of another Hellenic myth, the name Berenice was “κυρίως Μακεδονικό όνομα (αντί Φερενίκη)” (1980: 87). Upon his description of the famous Berenice of the Hellenic past, the daughter of Lagos and Antigone, Bougas adds: “Παντρεύτηκε τον Πτολεμαίο Α΄ τον Σωτήρα. Διακρινόταν για την ευφύια και την ωραιότητά της”<sup>3</sup> (1980: 87). My emphasis on this link between Poe's character and the Hellenic Berenice is not unprovoked. Hayes' previously mentioned assertion leads one to the ancient Greek poet Callimachus who wrote a poem for Berenice, Ptolemeus' wife. Its title was “Βερενίκης κόμη” which should read as “Berenice's hair”. Only its summary and its interpretation by Catullus, the Latin poet (84-54 B.C.), have been recovered so far by archaeologists. The existence of this poem could perhaps mean that Poe had in fact read it, betraying his source of inspiration. “Berenice” and “Βερενίκης Κόμη” both center upon a female body part of a homonymous woman: on one hand, Poe emphasizes Berenice's teeth whereas, on the other hand, Callimachus emphasizes his own Berenice's hair. Additionally, both works seem to share narrators who bear a strong affection for their corresponding female idol, and this affection leads them to an obsession that is centered on the aforementioned body parts. Bearing these observations in mind, I argue that they both incorporate the same pattern of obsession. Intriguingly, Joan Dayan was among the first literary critics to openly argue Poe's choice of this specific name was not coincidental. As she particularly mentions, “that lovers and acts of love form the ground for Egaeus' acts of defilement and unnatural or sinful possession is underscored by Poe's choice of the name ‘Berenice’. Poe's names, like his epigraphs, are never arbitrary” (1984: 495). In her study, she also acknowledges the connection between Poe's tale and the ancient poem, and she compares the two works by claiming the following:

*An analogy should be made between the constellated lock of the virtuous and devoted wife and the “phantasma” of the teeth of a second Berenice, her teeth described as stars in the sky; “with the most vivid and hideous distinctness,” they “floated about amid the changing lights and shadows of the chamber.” And as the ur-Berenice undergoes a metaphoric deflowering or sundering as a prelude to reunion—or as in Pope's “The Rape of the Lock,” the Baron's sin is redeemed through the lock's apotheosis—Poe's Berenice loses her teeth to engender another more complex consolidation. (1984: 495)*

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<sup>3</sup> Translated from Modern Greek as follows: Berenice (or Ferenice) was mainly a Macedonian name. She was the daughter of Lagos and Antigone. She got married to Ptolemaeus; she was renowned for her intelligence and beauty. [My own translation]

Dayan's arguments are convincing and justified, ultimately reaching to the conclusion that "Berenice" should be perceived as a passionate expression of grief; not through the teeth but through their metonyms (1984: 495). In emphasizing the importance of ancient Greek Berenice's hair for Hellenic mythology and setting it beside the importance of Berenice's teeth in Poe's story, I deem relevant to present the following extract from Bougas et al.'s research on the matter:

*Κατά την παράδοση, η Βερενίκη, σύζυγος του βασιλιά Πτολεμαίου, έταξε να αφιερώσει την όμορφη κόμη της, που πολλοί είχαν επαινέσει, σαν ανάθημα στον Ναό της Ζεφυρίτιδας Αφροδίτης, αν γύριζε σώος και νικητής ο νεαρός τότε Πτολεμαίος από την εκστρατεία του κατά της Συρίας. Όταν όμως μετά την επιτυχή έκβαση του πολέμου και την επιστροφή του νικητή βασιλιά εκείνη πρόσφερε το τάμα της στη θεά, ο Πτολεμαίος στεναχωρήθηκε πολύ, εξοργίστηκε δε όταν την επόμενη μέρα η κόμη εξαφανίστηκε από τον ναό, γεγονός που προκάλεσε μεγάλη κατάπληξη. Τότε ο αστρονόμος και αυλικός Κόνωνας ανέλαβε την πρωτοβουλία να κατευνάσει την οργή του βασιλιά. Του είπε ότι ο Δίας εκτίμησε πολύ την χειρονομία της βασίλισσας και μετέφερε την κόμη της στον ουρανό για να την βλέπουν οι θνητοί και να επαινούν την θεοσέβεια και την συνέπεια του λόγου της.<sup>4</sup> (1984: 89)*

Poe's affection for Hellenic literature and history has been well documented in a number of seminal studies. For instance, Silverman (1992: 41) makes note of Poe's renowned attempts to imitate his literary idol, Lord Byron, and his quest to help the Greeks in their revolution. Other studies such as Burton Pollin's (2001) reveal that Poe showed his interest on the Greeks by declaring that he was proficient in their language; yet, as this literary critic categorically stresses, "his Greek was almost as defective as his German" (2001: 72). Regardless of his inaccurate claims, Poe did not hesitate in making allusions to Hellenic works he had read. As a matter of fact, he sometimes even presented them as his own ideas, and Nelson F. Adkin's (1948) study verifies my claim. In 1836, Poe allegedly published "Some Ancient Greek Authors" in the second volume of the Southern Literary Messenger in which he exposes his extensive knowledge of a large number of ancient Greek works. Be that as it may, the Edgar Allan Poe society of Baltimore (2012) exposes in

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<sup>4</sup> Translated from Modern Greek as follows: According to tradition, Ptolemaeus' wife, Berenice, swore to dedicate her beautiful hair as a sacrifice at the temple of Aphrodite in the case her husband came back alive from his battle against Syria. When he came back alive, his wife fulfilled her promise but Ptolemaeus was very disappointed. Mad as he was, Berenice's Hair disappeared from the temple the next day, to everyone's surprise. Then Conon, an astronomer, attempted to reassure the king by telling him that Zeus appreciated his wife's act and transferred her hair to the stars for all the mortals to see it so that they admire her respect to the gods along with her honesty. [My own translation]

a note on this work that, despite the fact that David Jackson and W. D. Hull attributed this publication to Poe, such claims have been disputed by Pollin and Ridgely. Even if Poe had or had not published the aforementioned work, it becomes obvious that he was a philhellene, just as John Sanidopoulos mentions in his 2014 analysis. I hence argue that he might have read Callimachus' short poem since the emotional similarities between the two poems along with an existence of an analogous maniacal obsession over a female body part and Poe's own obsession by Hellenic literature may all indicate the above.

Having observed the formerly indicated connections between Poe's tale, Hellenic literature and history, one can conclude that the American author may have indeed been influenced by Hellenic sources while composing "Berenice". Poe's choice of naming his male protagonist after the ancient Greek king and the sentimental analogies of the two tragic figures, the association of Berenice to the homonymous Hellenic queen, and the existence of identical patterns of obsession over a female body part in Poe's work and Βερενίκης Κόμη all lead one to that conclusion. However, this study only presents the potential of this topic, presenting promising evidence and indicating the need for additional systematic studies. Future works should delve into the possibility of the existence of similar patterns of obsessions in Poe along with the influence Hellenic myths might have had on his literary production. Additional light should also be shed on the significance of the shift from hair to teeth in "Berenice" as well as on Poe's engagement with Hellenic literature so that clear conclusions are drawn regarding claims of philhellenism in the American author's works.

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