



Unmasking the Red Death: Introduction

SPECIAL COLLECTION:
UNMASKING THE RED
DEATH

INTRODUCTION

TIM BEASLEY-MURRAY 

EMILY BAKER 

*Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article



ABSTRACT

During the so-called High Lockdown in the UK (March to June 2020) a group of staff and students from University College London's School of European Languages and Cultures (SELCS) gathered weekly for a Summer Book Club (SBC) to discuss works as diverse as Thomas Mann's epic tale of convalescence and philosophical exploration *The Magic Mountain* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's captivating comparison of the experience of race in Nigeria, the UK, and the US in *Americanah*. Among the true "pandemic-lit" that we chose to focus on was Edgar Allen Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death". In discussing this tale, we could not help noticing the parallels between ourselves and Prince Prospero and his courtiers, who—in the face of devastating disease sweeping the realm—devoted themselves to aesthetic pleasures within their castellated abbey, just as we too found refuge in (closed) community and culture. Another of our book choices revealed a similar and uncanny parallel: in Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* a band of actors and musicians roam a devastated America, putting on Shakespeare for the survivors of another deadly pandemic. Their motto, "Because survival is not sufficient", a quotation from Star Trek, chimed with our sense too that, in the face of the pandemic, culture had a central role.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Emily Baker

University College London, GB
e.baker@ucl.ac.uk

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Beasley-Murray, Tim and Emily Baker 2023 Unmasking the Red Death: Introduction. *Modern Languages Open*, 2023(1): 14 pp. 1–5. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.424>

During the first lockdown in the UK (March to June 2020) a group of staff and students from University College London's School of European Languages and Cultures (SELCS) gathered weekly for a Summer Book Club (SBC) to discuss works as diverse as Thomas Mann's epic tale of convalescence and philosophical exploration *The Magic Mountain* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's captivating comparison of the experience of race in Nigeria, the UK, and the US in *Americanah*. Among the true "pandemic-lit" that we chose to focus on was Edgar Allan Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death". In discussing this tale, we could not help noticing the parallels between ourselves and Prince Prospero and his courtiers, who—in the face of devastating disease sweeping the realm—devoted themselves to aesthetic pleasures within their castellated abbey, just as we too found refuge in (closed) community and culture. Another of our book choices revealed a similar and uncanny parallel: in Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* a band of actors and musicians roam a devastated America, putting on Shakespeare for the survivors of another deadly pandemic. Their motto, "Because survival is not sufficient", a quotation from Star Trek, chimed with our sense too that, in the face of the pandemic, culture had a central role.

As these references to Poe and St. John Mandel indicate, the choice of texts made by the SBS was far from arbitrary. Just as Camus's *La Peste* and Defoe's *Journal of a Plague Year* shot up the bestsellers' lists, so we too turned our attention to the fictions of the past and present that—through their themes of plague and pandemic—were able to shed light on our present circumstances; as if fiction—as much as the lenses of vaccinology, the graphs of statisticians, and the predictions of public health experts—might also be a key to making sense of our situation. This collection of short articles is then, in one sense, an attempt to make sense of that attempt to make sense.

In her contribution to this collection, "*Folie des critiques*", Mathelinda Nabugodi suggests that "criticism, far from being a linear ascent towards ever more knowledge about a text, is a kind of folly: an elaborate edifice of words conceived in madness". Indeed, most of us can probably relate to a sense of madness, or giddiness, that set in as we adapted to radically new limitations of space and expansions of time—in the absence of commutes and school runs, and nightly excursions to social events or the gym. Part of this madness was the vertiginous sense that the practices and assumptions that had provided the foundations for our existence for many years were now under radical interrogation. Where once we had been atomised on our separate daily trajectories, we became, paradoxically, much more connected by the relative similarity and simultaneity of our situations of confinement. Rachel Bowlby in her piece "The Count" pays close attention to all the instances of the numerical in Poe's story and points out that, aside from the prince and the figure of the Red Death itself, "there is a dearth of individual people", alluding, thus, to this communising effect of the plague. Even at the ball the revellers "are shown only as pairs [...] they are 'waltzers' who whirl and whirl, until they pause for a short while at the stroke of each new hour [...] Like a single body, they are united by the great clock's imposition of its hourly regime and their identical response to it" (Bowlby). This was not unlike the weekly "clap for the NHS" that seemed to make us much more aware of and familiar to neighbours that we might previously have only glimpsed in the communal elevator or pulling out of their driveways; or the simultaneous gatherings in front of the television to watch "daily briefings" and special announcements that framed our collective horizons for the next "phase" of Covid mitigation.

In framing the relationship of literature to time, Nabugodi turns to Roland Barthes and Walter Benjamin, reminding us that it is "the act of reading that actualises the text for the present", with reference to Benjamin's notion of the constellation or dialectical image that "enables us to recognise the moments of anachronistic futurity contained in works from the past". In the year, 2020, that she describes as one "without time", futurity was indeed thrown into question, under the shadow of illness and death, in a way that had never before been so palpable. All of a sudden, to read Poe, St. John Mandel, Camus, or Defoe was to read texts that spoke much more directly to us. As Jon Beasley-Murray puts it in his piece "Learning During Coronavirus: 'The Masque of the Red Death'": "the lines between child and adult, past and present, literal and figural, art and science, literature and life, were all proving surprisingly porous as we read a story that is, in the end, precisely about the difficulty of establishing secure borders." Jon was a member of an overlapping "Learning During Covid" (LDC) London-Vancouver family-reading group. His article charts the attempts by young teenagers to make sense of the situation, yet

still weaves in references to Agamben, Mbembe, Sontag, Spinoza, and Deleuze in the course of his analysis of Poe, Woolf, and a number of the other texts examined in the LDC. In emphasising the danger of certain modes of displacement of meaning—or worse—its implied fixity that can be encouraged in certain spheres of learning, Jon Beasley-Murray hopes that literature can “help us to think through, without pretending to resolve, the kinds of paradox and contradiction thrown up by an event such as our current global pandemic, the ways in which it upends our habits and routines, as well as offering the chance to create new ones”.

But why was it that “The Masque” particularly captured our attention during the compressed and expanded time and place of lockdown? And is there something about lockdown that meant that, instead of a special collection examining, say, a range of plague and pestilence texts, we chose to concentrate on one text only and range ourselves like curious critical sentinels around it (albeit in dialogue with literary and critical connections, as above). There was something in the first lockdown that encouraged a living with what was immediately at hand, a focus on and reliance on the things that were immediately there, whether this meant putting together lunch out of tins from the back of the cupboard or sketching out articles from the books on one’s shelves only, without recourse to libraries or to books gathering dust in offices in Bloomsbury. It meant a slowing down and a focusing on what was within the limits of one’s confinement (*confinement* being the term that the French language uses to refer to lockdown) and to find the limitless within it.

So, like Vilém—the hero of the Czech poet Mácha’s masterpiece *Máj*—who, imprisoned in a tower on the lake, awaiting his execution on the morrow, gives internal voice to boundless flights of metaphysical speculation, or, like Xavier de Maistre’s *Voyage autour de ma chambre*, also written under a more generalised threat of violent death, or even like Auerbach, trapped in Istanbul deprived of libraries (or so the myth goes), writing *Mimesis* on the basis of what was at hand, performing close readings of short passages from the books on his shelves, and constructing a vaulting reading of the Western literary tradition as a whole while war rages around him, we chose to find the limitless and grand in only one text, a short text, moreover, of five or six pages. And, in so doing, this project and this collection of short pieces perform the experience of which they speak: a confinement to the small, to the at-hand (for most of us had a volume of Poe’s stories on our shelves and, if not, the internet stepped in easily) and to the manageable (because the first lockdown made a range of demands that meant that everything had to be manageable). This is something out of which we hope—with a slowing down and narrowing of focus—something larger might have arisen.

And what a text! If what we have said so far implies that *any* single short plague and pestilence text could have played the role that “The Masque” does here, this would be wrong. Poe’s text has a number of things going for it. First, in literary historical terms, “The Masque” fulfils the function of an intertextual node: drawing on Gothic and Baroque models, it reaches back to Shakespeare, Boccaccio, folk-tale, and the Bible, *inter alia*; and, looking forward, its echoes resound after it in high and, particularly, popular culture—everything from the Simpsons to apocalyptic fantasy zombie films and more. This intertextual richness—and the comparative refractions that result from inquiring into it—is a springboard for a number of the articles in this issue. For instance, in her contribution “Community, Survival, and the Arts in the Boccaccian Tradition” Jennifer Rushworth compares “The Masque of the Red Death” to Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, similar in their starting points as charting aristocratic and artistic responses to plague, but very different in their outcomes. Instead of suffering the fate of death, Boccaccio’s characters are able to return to their Florentine homes, providing a much more hopeful lesson for us as eager readers. In evaluating the reasons for these different outcomes Rushworth makes a contrast between “on the one hand, order, moderation, and cooperation in Boccaccio and, on the other hand, disorder, excess, and autocracy in Poe”. Ultimately, Rushworth points towards the unfinished and open form of another Boccaccian text, Marguerite de Navarre’s *Heptaméron*, that “calls for us to strain our ears and our imaginations to catch the echoes of unwritten, future stories” (Rushworth).

As important as the function of “The Masque” as a place where intertextual threads are drawn together is, its curious identity in terms of genre is also crucial. So, while the story’s thematics and stylistic register point to an American and Romantic variety of the Gothic (where it is usually situated by literary historians), the story also points towards the Baroque. So, one might observe

the baroque excess of decoration and ornament to be found in the text's linguistic and semantic texture, as well as in Prospero's abbey itself and its decorations, in his courtiers' revelries, and so on. One might, likewise, allude to Poe's depiction of the extremes of earthly folly and heavenly judgements. And, above all, one might be led to think of "The Masque" as an articulation of that most Baroque mode of all, the allegorical, and to think that "Prospero", "the Abbey", "the Red Death" must be playing a part in some decipherable universe of meaning, pointing allegorically to some other things that stand behind the text itself. Now, as Benjamin suggests, the result of the baroque combination of excess and of the allegorical is a perhaps paradoxical situation in which "anything can come to stand for anything else". It is this allegorical instability—inherent to Poe's tale, as to those moments, like *Trauerspiel*, where fixed allegorical schemata topple over through excess into an arbitrariness of signification—that allows later readers to find in "The Masque" a source of polyvalence. And this polyvalence, in turn, opens up avenues that led to what we have at hand, to what exercises us, politically, personally, and as scholars; so, for example, this collection contains Emily Baker's juxtaposition of the unravelling of Poe's story with the spread of Covid-19 in Brazil, Xine Yao's examination of links to the resurgence of the "Black Lives Matter" movement, and Lucy Bollington's comparison of the seven richly decorated chambers with the UK government's early Covid-19 colour codes for registering risk.

In "Red Alerts" Bollington observes that, in the same way as the experience of revellers in Prospero's abbey was framed by the colour-coded rooms, so too was our experience of early lockdown in the UK framed by colour-coded threat levels that, in turn, recall the US Homeland Security Advisory System put in place post-9/11. Drawing upon Brian Massumi's analysis of the US chart, Bollington describes how these colour codes work "through a production of affect that is felt in the body" that has uncertain social consequences. Her piece outlines the racialised effects of these warnings in the US context, while positing that the vagueness and flexibility of the UK warning system allowed for "erosions of representation and care" as the effects of the initial policy of "herd immunity" ran their destructive course.

The question of structural precarity and a lack of care and responsibility in the face of Covid-19 is also raised in Emily Baker's text "Castellated Abbeys, Fortified Enclaves: Immunity and Sovereignty in Edgar Allan Poe's 'Masque of the Red Death' and Contemporary Brazil". In this contribution Baker argues that "racial anxiety is at the heart of both Poe's story and the particular spatial tendency in Brazil's cities of elites to live in 'fortified enclaves' (Caldeira), comparable in many ways to the 'castellated abbey' of Poe's story." She observes that, like the autocratic Prince Prospero, Jair Bolsonaro's thanatopolitical profferings throughout the course of the pandemic put the most vulnerable in Brazilian society deliberately at risk.

In similar fashion, the racialised effects of Covid-19, as well as Poe's own racist angst, are traced in Xine Yao's piece "Black Skin, Red Masques: Reading Frantz Fanon and Audre Lorde in Tension with Edgar Allan Poe". Examining the convergence of the Covid and Black Lives Matter crises, Yao proves that there is no coincidence in this: "both are deadly symptoms of neoliberalism built upon the historical foundations of colonialism and imperialism. Both result in the disproportionate deaths of the most structurally vulnerable: Black death by different biopolitical means, but from the same colonial origins." Yao brings Poe's text into dialogue with works by Franz Fanon and Audre Lorde to interrogate, among other things, "Black consciousness, agency, and self-care which are simultaneously central to, and occluded from, the frame of Poe's narrative and the unfolding narrative of Covid-19".

In further speaking to inequality at the heart of the text, Tim Beasley-Murray in "Poe on Brick Lane" argues that "The Masque"—whose subtitle is "a fantasy"—contains at least two fantasies. On the one hand, it articulates the fantasy of the rich and powerful, who, in times of crisis and plague, are able to lock themselves away and devote themselves to pleasure, while the poor die outside their walls. And, on the other hand, it articulates the fantasy of the poor and the oppressed. For the end of Poe's story contains the hope that the mighty shall be put down from their seat and the rich be sent empty away, even if (continuing with this paraphrase of the Magnificat), the hungry aren't exactly filled with good things and the humble and meek are not quite exalted. In any event, these fantasies are both present, co-existing in Poe's story, without resolution. On the one hand, its narrator—and, with it, we readers—seem to share in Prospero's defiant and insane exuberance, revelling with the thousand nobles in the masque; on the other hand, its narrator leads us with macabre glee to Prospero's downfall

and relishes gloriously the devastating finality of his grim end. An unresolved and irresolvable ambivalence, like that of “The Masque” was, Beasley-Murray suggests, also a constituent part of our experience of lockdown that inflects our reading of Poe. On the one hand, as the *bien-pensant*, left-leaning intellectuals that we probably are, our sympathies—personal and political—mean that our pieces tend to side with the poor outside Prospero’s gates. On the other hand (without conflating the experiences of all contributors), we have to recognise our privilege: our university salaries, our reasonably comfortable flats, houses and sometimes gardens, our aesthetic pleasure and passions, among them, not least, reading Poe. And, in so doing, we recognise uncomfortably that—in these coronavirus times—we might have more closely approximated the thousand nobles within the abbey.


Perhaps, therefore, the important thing about these pieces and the initiative from which they emerged, the SBC, is that community was formed. The weekly Wednesday meetings at which many of the contributors still meet to share stories of family life, to seek advice, to moan about university policy and national politics and so on, is a place where—walls or not—a form of community has endured and enriched the participants. Prospero’s abbey has, for good or for bad, become a common ground, a place (albeit a virtual place, virtual both insofar as it is mediated by Microsoft Teams but also by intellectual and professional activity) where we meet. Similarly, these pieces might be likened to chambers of different colours, different refractions, different readings, chambers that constitute a place that nonetheless somehow holds together. Prospero’s abbey has become our abbey. And now, with the publication of this collection on the aptly named *Modern Languages Open*, we want to tear its walls down and invite you to dance.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank all of the student members of the SELCS Summer Book Club and the members of the “Learning During Coronavirus” book club for infinitely enriching our discussions of Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death”. We would also especially like to thank Florian Mussgnug, who came up with the initiative of the special issue and sponsored its publication via his UCL research allowance.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Tim Beasley-Murray  orcid.org/0000-0003-4332-6089
University College London, GB

Emily Baker  orcid.org/0000-0002-8620-3356
University College London, GB

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Beasley-Murray, Tim and
Emily Baker 2023 Unmasking
the Red Death: Introduction.
Modern Languages Open,
2023(1): 14 pp. 1–5. DOI:
[https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.
v0i0.424](https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.424)

Published: 31 March 2023

COPYRIGHT:

© 2023 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Modern Languages Open is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Liverpool University Press.