

## IMPUNITY IN THE CASK OF AMONTILLADO

I must not only punish, but punish with impunity. A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser.

Montresor has foresight. He knows there is sure to be a lengthy and exhaustive inquiry after Fortunato disappears, not only by the police but by friends and relatives. People will be talking about the mystery for years. Most will naturally assume the missing man was murdered, since he was well established in Venice and would have no motive for running away.

Montresor claims he was injured a thousand times. What sorts of injuries could he have sustained that would not be known to others? If it were general knowledge, then Montresor would be a prime suspect. And Montresor wants impunity. He wants to be above suspicion, which is why he hides his hatred with smiles and why he has conditioned himself, not only to refer to Fortunato continually as his friend, but even to *think* of him as his friend, his good friend, and his poor friend, even as he is leading him to his death and for fifty years afterwards. Most people will assume he was the victim of foul play—but none will suspect Montresor because they believe the two were such friends.

But how could Montresor have been injured so many times without people hearing about it—either from Montresor himself, from Fortunato, or from other sources? And—assuming the injuries were real and not imaginary—why would Montresor put up with them so long? After all, it would take years to inflict a thousand injuries!

In the third paragraph of the story Montresor makes it clear, at least “in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art,” that both he and Fortunato are what might be called “gentlemen-merchants,” specialists who deal in paintings, antiques, gemmary, and other luxury items. Venice is a decaying city, long past its days of glory, and sinking slowly into the Adriatic. Aristocratic families are existing by selling off the family treasures, which could include paintings by great Renaissance masters. The buyers are the British and Austrian millionaires mentioned in the third paragraph. The sellers want courtesy, reliability, expertise, and confidentiality.

Here is how Henry James describes Venice in “The Aspern Papers,” published in 1888, only a few decades after the events described in “The Cast of Amontillado.”

I forget what answer I made to this--I was given up to two other reflections. The first of these was that if the old lady lived in such a big, imposing house she could not be in any sort of misery and therefore would not be tempted by a chance to let a couple of rooms. I expressed this idea to Mrs. Prest, who gave me a very logical reply. "If she didn't live in a big house how could it be a question of her having rooms to spare? If she were not amply lodged herself you would lack ground to approach her. Besides, a big house here, and especially in this quartier perdu, proves nothing at all: it is perfectly compatible with a state of penury. Dilapidated old palazzi, if you will go out of the way for them, are to be had for five shillings a year. And as for the people who live in them--no, until you have explored Venice socially as much as I have you can form no idea of their domestic desolation. They live on nothing, for they have nothing to live on."

Fortunato is an insider, Montresor an outsider. Poe takes pains to characterize Montresor as a Frenchman, at least in spirit, even though his family may have lived in Venice for a couple of centuries. All those bones beneath his palazzo are not necessarily those of his ancestors. Even the palazzo is probably not his. He may be renting it for a pittance. His servants are unreliable and disrespectful because he pays them little or nothing. Montresor uses many French words in his secret confession, including roquelaire, flambeaux, Medoc, and De Grave. He gives his Fortunato French wine. He has a rapier concealed under his roquelaire. He makes his foreignness apparent when he writes:

Few Italians have the true virtuoso spirit.

And

Fortunato, like his countrymen, was a quack ...

It is noteworthy that Montresor is not taking part in the carnival. He is not wearing a costume but a black cloak called a roquelaire. The spirit of the carnival permits him to wear a black mask when he chooses. Just the fact that Poe has given him a French name is significant. He wants the reader to be sure Montresor is an outsider, a man who may have been referred to behind his back by others, including Fortunato, as “that Frenchman.”

Fortunato has an advantage over Montresor whenever some aristocrat has to part with another heirloom. Montresor has to live on scraps, finders' fees, ad hoc partnerships with the wealthy Fortunato, and such. When he says he got a bargain on a pipe of Amontillado, Fortunato immediately thinks of buying the rest of the cargo and leaving his friend out in the cold. This explains how Montresor has been injured and why he maintains relations with the man who has injured him by taking the lion's share of commissions when they acted as brokers or of the profits when they bought things outright; by cutting him out entirely in some cases (*as he intends to do with the Amontillado!*); and no doubt by failing to invite him to most of the social gatherings at his still sumptuous palazzo. The "great friendship" between these two partner-competitors, these friendly enemies, is a one-sided one. Montresor has no need to explain all this to the reader. He is writing in strict confidence to "You, who so well know the nature of my soul."

In fact, he might not have even sent the letter. He might have penned it one night while intoxicated on French wine and decided not to mail it after reading it the next morning. He might have kept it among his papers, where it was found after his death and somehow fell into the hands of an American editor named Edgar Allan Poe, who translated it into English and published it in *Godey's Lady's Magazine*.

So the thousand injuries of Fortunato would not be known to others; and Montresor would be safe from suspicion of Fortunato's murder if only he could manage to do it without being recognized in the victim's company on the night of his disappearance.

Montresor finds Fortunato on the street. His main concern is to find out whether Fortunato is expected anywhere. He would like to leave a cold trail. It would be best if his victim were not missed until at least the following day. By then all the celebrants would have only dim recollections of seeing Fortunato in his jester's costume but no idea of where he was going or whether he had anyone with him. Montresor, dressed all in black and wearing a black mask, would be virtually invisible beside the garishly dressed and boisterous harlequin.

Montresor twice pretends to suppose Fortunato is expected somewhere:

"As you are engaged, I am on my way to Luchesi. If any one has a critical turn it is he. He will tell me" –

"Luchesi cannot tell Amontillado from Sherry."

Montresor does not get the assurance he wants. He tries again:

“My friend, no; I will not impose upon your good nature. I perceive you have an engagement. Luchesi”—

“I have no engagement; come.”

Now Montresor has the assurance he needs. What pretext could he have had for assuming Fortunato has an engagement? Only that he supposedly hasn't been able to find him. He knows he is not imposing on his friend's good nature. His friend is enchanted by the notion that pipes of Amontillado (each containing 126 gallons) are available at a bargain price. He imagines a shipload of these casks and the enormous profit he could make by buying up the entire cargo, bottling the wine, and selling it by the case to his British and Austrian clients. Good wine in oak barrels will only improve with age and increase in value.

The illusion Montresor creates is that he bought one pipe and would buy more that very night if only he were sure it was genuine. (Obviously he does not want 126 gallons of Amontillado for personal consumption but for resale—and so does Fortunato.) That explains why the supposedly naïve and trusting Montresor was searching for Fortunato and why he is now rushing to Luchesi. He wants to buy more of this Amontillado while he is still the only person who knows it is available at a bargain price. Montresor is a poor man. He could only buy a few more of these large casks. *But Fortunato is a rich man and could buy up the entire cargo*—which is exactly what he intends to do after he has made sure it is genuine Amontillado. No doubt Luchesi is also rich and could also buy the entire cargo if he heard about it. That is why Fortunato must go with Montresor and prevent him from talking to Luchesi.

Montresor, of course, has no intention of going to Luchesi, and the Amontillado, of course, does not exist. There is no ship newly arrived from Barcelona carrying a whole cargo of Amontillado sherry. Why doesn't Fortunato ask about where Montresor acquired his single pipe at a bargain price—and how much of a bargain? Precisely because he doesn't want to show too great an interest.

Many first-time readers get the impression that Fortunato

1. Wants to do his friend a favor.
2. Wants to show off his connoisseurship.
3. Wants to drink a glass of what wonderful Amontillado.

This may be because Fortunato wants Montresor to think he is just doing him a favor by sampling his purchase and rendering his expert opinion, and also because Fortunato doesn't ask any questions about the location or price of the wine or anything else. Fortunato fully intends to declare that his friend's wine is only ordinary sherry--regardless of whether or not it is. Then, having forestalled Luchesi and having discouraged Montresor from buying more, Fortunato can easily find a newly arrived Spanish ship in the harbor and deal directly with the captain or the purser. When Montresor finds out about being double-crossed, Fortunato will have added to his thousand injuries and will laugh it off as "an excellent jest." He is wearing a jester's costume, not because he thinks of himself as a fool, but because he thinks of himself as a clever jester.

Early in the narrative Montresor says:

He had a weak point—this Fortunato—although in other regards he was a man to be respected and even feared.

It is only when Montresor has him chained to the rock wall that Fortunato shows he is anything but a drunken boor and that he is "a man to be respected and even feared." He realizes what has happened to him as he quickly sobers up. His only chance of escape is by using his wits. He says:

“Ha! ha! ha! – he! he! – a very good joke indeed –an excellent jest. We will have many a rich laugh about it at the palazzo – he! he! he! – over our wine – he! he! he!”

“The Amontillado!” I said.

“He! he! he! – he! he! he! – yes, the Amontillado. But is it not getting late? Will not they be awaiting us at the palazzo, the Lady Fortunato and the rest? Let us be gone.”

Fortunato is clever—a man to be feared. His subtle “awaiting us” has a double implication. Lady Fortunato and the rest—relatives, friends, guests, servants—are not expecting *Montresor* because he is rarely if ever invited; but Fortunato implies that they are all expecting him and that other people they have passed in the streets will have recognized *both* of them and probably assumed they were both on their way to Fortunato's palazzo to join the already large gathering.

Fortunato is also offering Montresor a rather belated invitation to a party at his home. No doubt there is no such party, or Fortunato would be there himself and not out carousing on the Venice streets. But he is suggesting that Montresor will be welcome and can expect to be a more intimate member of his circle in the future. Perhaps he is gently reminding him that he has been a valuable associate in the past.

Fortunato is trying to plant fear in his captor's mind. He doesn't for a moment believe this is "an excellent jest," but he hopes he can make Montresor *think* he believes it is a complicated practical joke. That way, Montresor might feel safe in unlocking the ancient padlock—provided he thinks there is a real probability that he has been recognized as Fortunato's companion, believes he may become more welcome in Fortunato's social circle, and believes that Fortunato is expected home soon.

If Fortunato is expected and doesn't arrive, his relatives, friends, and servants may go out inquiring about him that very night. Fortunato knows Montresor doesn't want this. Fortunato was extremely conspicuous in his jester's costume and his cap with tinkling bells. Celebrants could be found who would say, "Yes, he went that way. He was with a smaller fellow dressed in black and wearing a dark mask." Fortunato could be traced to Montessori's palazzo, and a thorough search could discover a newly erected wall overlaid with bones.

If Montresor fell for these ploys, he might be tempted to free his prisoner. Fortunato would do nothing to show his outrage, even after he was safely away from these horrible catacombs. He would take his friend to his home—showing some surprise that there was no large gathering as he expected—offer him food and wine, laugh, joke, and finally get rid of him. Then some time in the near future Montresor would be found floating in the Venice harbor with his throat cut.

But Montresor has established that Fortunato has no "engagement." He knows that his prisoner has realized there is no cask of Amontillado and that he is trapped. Montresor also feels confident that he has not been recognized as Fortunato's companion. He is sure his good friend will not be missed until tomorrow, when everybody will be sleeping late, waking up with hangovers, regretting their sins of

the previous night, and only vaguely recalling a man in motley with ringing bells on his cap, accompanied by a silent man in black—*or was it only a shadow?*

Montresor will have the impunity he considered essential to the perfect revenge. He will naturally have to show concern about his missing friend for as long as the disappearance remains a topic of conversation, which could be for several years. And finally people will have forgotten all about it.

Fifty years after committing his crime, Montresor, now an old man getting ready to die, living all alone in a Venetian mansion, drunk as usual on good French claret, will take a pen in hand and start to write--in Italian, French, or even Latin, but certainly not in English, to the man or woman—most likely a woman—whom he addresses as “You, who so well know the nature of my soul”:

“The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as best I could, but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge.”

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